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Education and the Economy: narrowing the purpose of education?

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Abstract

The relationship between education, training, and the economy is critically examined, as is the notion that education plays a decisive role in fostering individual economic capacity and national economic performance. This instrumentalist perspective rests on an uncritical approach to human capital theory and its manifestations in neoclassical economic thought—premises that have shaped social policy and analysis, becoming the established norm. This conceptual paper analyzes the underlying assumptions and structuring ideas that underpin this view, which has solidified into common sense. Alternative ways of understanding education, training, skills, and employment are presented. It is argued that the purpose and value of education are far broader; they should be linked to a tradition of educational praxis grounded in social justice and democratic citizenship, rather than being reduced to the needs of economic growth and employer demands regarding the workforce.

Keywords: **Economics of Education. Human Capital. South Africa. Development.**

La Educación y la Economía: ¿se está restringiendo el propósito de la educación?

Resumen

Se examina críticamente la relación entre educación, formación y economía, así como la noción de que la educación desempeña un papel decisivo en el fomento de la capacidad económica individual y del desempeño económico nacional. Esta perspectiva instrumentalista se basa en un enfoque acrítico de la teoría del capital humano y de sus manifestaciones en el pensamiento económico neoclásico — premisas que han moldeado la política social y el análisis, convirtiéndose en la norma establecida. Este artículo conceptual analiza los supuestos subyacentes y las ideas estructurantes que sustentan esta visión, que se ha consolidado como sentido común. Se presentan formas alternativas de comprender la educación, la formación, las competencias y el empleo. Se argumenta que el propósito y el valor de la educación son mucho más amplios; deben estar vinculados a una tradición de praxis educativa fundamentada en la justicia social y la ciudadanía democrática, en lugar de ser reducidos a las necesidades del crecimiento económico y a las demandas de los empleadores en relación con la fuerza laboral.

Palabras-clave: **Economia de la Educación. Capital Humano. Africa del Sur. Desarrollo.**

Educação e Economia: restringindo a finalidade da educação?

Resumo

Examina-se criticamente a relação entre educação, formação e economia, bem como a noção de que a educação desempenha um papel decisivo no fomento da capacidade econômica individual e do desempenho econômico nacional. Essa perspectiva instrumentalista assenta-

se em uma abordagem acrítica da teoria do capital humano e de suas manifestações no pensamento econômico neoclássico — premissas que têm moldado a política social e a análise, tornando-se a norma estabelecida. Este artigo conceitual analisa os pressupostos subjacentes e as ideias estruturantes que sustentam essa visão, que se consolidou como senso comum. Apresentam-se formas alternativas de compreender a educação, a formação, as competências e o emprego. Argumenta-se que o propósito e o valor da educação são muito mais amplos; devem estar vinculados a uma tradição de práxis educacional fundamentada na justiça social e na cidadania democrática, em vez de serem reduzidos às necessidades do crescimento econômico e às demandas dos empregadores em relação à força de trabalho.

Palavras-chave: **Economia da Educação. Capital Humano. África Do Sul. Desenvolvimento.**

Introduction

A legion of commentators largely employed by financial institutions, tediously feed South Africans a daily diet of market fundamentalism through the print and electronic media. Their mantra is usually a permutation of the following clichés: 'We must be competitive and entrepreneurial'. 'We need more skills'. 'Education fails to provide young people with skills for employment'. 'We need more investment and economic growth' (Vally, 2014). Rarely do we hear dissenting voices and the simplistic statements and platitudes of these ‘experts’ are seldom challenged by journalists.

In a situation of mass unemployment and inequality this pre-emptive discourse related to the ‘skills mismatch’ argument and Human Capital Theory is seductive, playing, as it does, into the anxieties and ambitions of both parents and young people. Sears (2003, p. 78) argues that:

> Students facing a dismal market are likely to be more sympathetic to the idea that education should provide them with competitive advantages. Parents may have some sympathy for [this discourse] as they seek out opportunities for their children to succeed…Vocationalism is a central means by which education is being reoriented towards the market. The goal of lean schooling is to teach students how to realise themselves through the market, both by marketing themselves and meeting their needs through the market.

This seemingly common-sense approach places the burden of responsibility squarely on individuals and their ‘deficits’ while obscuring the real obstacles to procuring decent and remunerative employment. The ‘transition from school to work’ (Sears 2003, p. 80) problem is then simplistically reduced to inadequate career planning models and the lack of ‘entrepreneurial’ skills. The common-sense view is promoted as neutral, objective and ideology-free. The Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci explained how certain conceptions take on a hegemonic status promoted by the ruling class. These shared views cohere into ‘everyday wisdom’ and are rarely challenged. Hegemony relies in the first instance on securing some degree of consent from the ruled and primarily on subordination through ideas though it is built on a foundation of economic inequality.

The emphasis placed on the relationship between education (schooling and post-schooling in the main) and the economy is invariably about how education and training both at the individual and systemic level can enhance the possibilities for jobs. It is regarded as both

a consequence of economic development through the growth of the economy and as necessary to stimulate and enhance the very possibilities for aggregate economic growth through education and training.

The Skills Mismatch Argument and Human Capital Theory

In this view, the main proposition is the idea that there is a great shortage of skills in South African society which is accentuated in particular ‘critical areas of shortage’ making any possibilities for economic advancement unimaginable and that the education and training system is hopelessly out of sync with the demands of the local and global economy. The cause of unemployment, in general, is put at education’s door, more broadly arguing that education is not teaching what the economy needs. It is unfortunately true that many children and youth in South Africa leave school without the basic skills necessary for life and work. But as Steven Klees explains:

> The mismatch discourse is usually less about basic skills and more about vocational skills. The argument, while superficially plausible, is not true for at least two reasons. First, vocational skills, which are often context-specific, are best taught on the job. Second, unemployment is not a worker-skills supply problem, but a structural problem of capitalism (Vally, 2014, p. vii).

While focusing on education institutions and the supply-side the more useful and important question is the demand-side one, usually ignored by human capital theorists, regarding how can we create decent jobs that require valuable skills. The human capital discourse also ignores the value of education outside of waged work.

The dominant discourse around education in South Africa as elsewhere today assumes that socioeconomic development is contingent on the 'productive' role of education and training. The corollary to this belief is that unemployment particularly youth unemployment is related to the lack of requisite skills for the labour market and the inability of workers to keep up with technological change.

The general orientation of this discourse and the daily drone-like assertions of business journalism is the crude formulation that education and training on the supply side leads to skills, skills lead to employment, and employment leads to economic growth and hence jobs.

This lazy analysis is based on a raft of unjustified claims about the outcomes of education and skills in capitalist societies; that education and training is not simply a handmaiden for resolving the problems of low economic output; and that a wide range of factors and social relations circumscribe the potential value of education and training.

All too often, the relationship between education and the economy is understood through simplistic formulations and dogmatic assertions. In this view, the main proposition is that there is a great shortage of skills in South African society, which is accentuated in particular ‘critical areas of shortage’ to make any possibilities for economic advancement unimaginable.

Another proposition is that the education and training system is hopelessly out of sync with the demands of the local and global economy. Still another is that the lack of skills is one of the greatest obstacles to achieving higher levels of economic growth, and that it simultaneously is the primary cause for low levels of productivity and a lack of international competitiveness, resulting in South Africa falling further behind relative to the economies of other countries.

These assumptions are imprisoned by the conceptual conservatism of a perspective that regards education and training simply as instruments of the labour market requirements of business. These assumptions are made despite the strong and seemingly instructive constitutional injunctions about the broader humanising and citizenship-related role of education and training systems.

The lineage of this instrumentalist perspective lays in an unproblematic approach to human capital theory and its successive incarnations in neoclassical economic thought whose premises, having had considerable purchase on policy and social analysis over a long period, are now de rigueur.

The value of education should be defined in socioeconomic, cultural and political terms, and not reduced solely to the needs of economic growth. Knowledge, skills and the competencies derived from education and training are of course critically important for all societies and the wellbeing of nations. But the reduction of their value to the needs of employers in a market-dominated economic system, to the exclusion of their wider societal purposes, is a serious limitation on their social role.

The relationship between education and the economy cannot be separated from a range of other social, economic, political and cultural conditions in society. The idea that there is a direct and positively causal connection between education and the economy obfuscates the reality that education is not synonymous with employability – that is, the possession of 'knowledge', 'skills' and 'competencies' that might be gained through education and is not a guarantee of employment and participation in the labour market.

In our edited collection *Education, Economy and Society* (Vally, 2014) all the South African educationists of the past that we venerate today in South Africa, representing the diverse traditions in the broad liberation movement, had a very different vision of the society that exists today (Vally, 2014).

Their legacy gave rise to vibrant and vital education social movements in South Africa's recent past intended to instil in society the importance of knowledge as essential to the development of a citizenry and for the fullest expression of the potential of individuals (Vally, 2014). They believed in a purposeful education which recognises that the role of education and training also crucially involves understanding the values and belief systems in society, rebutting 'race', gender, ethnic and other stereotypes; the ability to evaluate ideas and systems critically, for transformative and critical thinking; the ability to communicate socially and to work for oneself and for society, and indeed to stimulate 'intellectual curiosity'. One which saw the potential role of education and training systems, in which a framework for state-directed support for working class and poor communities can be achieved and where a wide range of socially useful activities which are amenable to educational interventions exist.

These include interventions in healthcare, early childhood development, care for the aged, frail and disabled, locally based economic activities, co-operative development initiatives, cultural initiatives and other activities specifically directed at engaging communities in the process of development. Not the banal, reductive paradigm which is today the hallmark of the dominant approach drowning out important ideas on education and society.

In our book we argued, following from our struggle history that the purpose and value of education is much broader and should be linked to our rich tradition of educational praxis based on social justice and democratic citizenship and not reduced solely to the needs of economic

growth. Knowledge, skills and the competencies derived from education and training processes are of course critically important for all societies and the well-being of nations. However, the reduction of their value to the labour market needs of employers, to the exclusion of their wider societal purposes, is a serious limitation on their social role.

Taking issue with the human capital theory rationale behind the dominant view of education, the economist, Chang, has similarly argued that the links between education and raising the productivity of an economy is tenuous at best and that the reasons to invest in education do not rest in the common-sense and instrumental and economic rationales for education. He argues:

> […] there are many subjects that have no impact, even indirectly on most workers' productivity – literature, history, philosophy and music, for example. From a strictly economic point of view, teaching these subjects is a waste of time. We teach our children those subjects because we believe that they will eventually enrich their lives and also make them good citizens. Even though this justification for educational spending is increasingly under attack in an age in which everything is supposed to justify its existence in terms of its contribution to productivity growth, it remains … the most important reason to invest in education (Chang, 2010, p. 182).

South Africa has a proud legacy of education for liberation comprising a history of resistance in and through education. This resistance generated various popular epistemologies and pedagogies including the 'peoples' education movement', 'worker education' the 'popular adult and/ or community education movement' and 'education with production'. There were also many community-based initiatives around early childhood development, reading and literacy. Below, I will discuss People's Education and Workers Education as exemplars of alternatives to Apartheid Education, Human Capital Theory and neoliberal education.

People's Education and Paulo Freire in South Africa

In the 1980s up to the early 1990s the concept of Peoples' Education, in contrast to the apartheid education system, captured the imagination of many South Africans. It promised liberation from an authoritarian and unequal education system to one which could provide an alternative and a basis for a future democratic system. It was defined variously as "an educational movement, a vehicle for political mobilisation, an alternative philosophy, or a combination of all three" (Vally, 2002, p. 174).

A significant influence on and the forerunner to the People's Education movement of the eighties were the ideas and methods of the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. Freire's ideas were introduced to the University Christian Movement and through it to the South African Students Organisation (SASO) as early as 1970. Although the state banned Freire's books, hundreds of copied versions of *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* were clandestinely distributed at black universities and "eagerly studied by the young activists of the Black Consciousness Movement (BCN)" (Alexander, 1992:57-8). SASO students and others applied Freire's ideas to many literacy and other 'conscientisation' projects in urban townships and rural areas. The appeal of Friere's pedagogy to educational activists and theorists resided in fact that:

Freire's anti-capitalist social theory accorded with the experience of and the insights at which the liberation movement in South Africa in general and the educationists active in it in particular had increasingly arrived at:

- The situation out of which Freire's pedagogy had been formed resembled that which existed in South Africa's ghettos and homelands.
- Freire's pedagogical method of combining education/culture with conscientisation and politicisation accorded with the views of the BCM and was subsequently adopted by the broader liberation movement.
- The specific organisation of the struggle in the late seventies and especially in the eighties as a grassroots movement anchored in groups and projects in the 'community' brought with it an exceptional sensitivity regarding democratic principles. This sensitivity reinforced by Freire's pedagogy became integral to the practice of People's Education.

People's Education was seen as the means to build alternative governance structures in education and for promoting critical thinking and analysis. Critical thinking in this sense should not be confused with what is traditionally thought of as merely problem-solving skills, but rather, critical in this sense implied being able to understand, analyse and most importantly affect the socio-political and economic realities that shaped our lives. The emphasis on democratic governance was expressed in the call for the establishment of Student Representative Councils and Parent-Teacher-Student Associations (PTSAs) different from the functioning of present-day School Governing Bodies. The concept of democracy, access and equity emerged in the call for a unitary anti-racist and anti-sexist schooling system, an end to sexual harassment and corporal punishment, better resource provisioning, different curriculum and free compulsory education.

From the mid-1980s, supporters of People's Education were not only concerned with the transformation of schools; they also provided the impetus to the formation of hundreds of non-governmental education organisations and also actively challenged academics and the academy around three key areas: "1) accountability within the university and communities around them; 2) implementing People's Education in the universities themselves and 3) support for developing People's Education in schools through the production of alternative courses and teaching methods" (Vally, 2002, p. 183).

While radical interpretations of People's Education remained dominant throughout the better part of the 1980s, liberal views on education gained cachet from the beginning of negotiation between the ANC (African National Congress) and the apartheid regime in the early 1990s. The role of civil society organisations and even the language of People's Education become increasingly marginal to the overall project of education change. The discourse and content shifted substantially from radical demands which focused on social engagement and democratising power relations, to one which emphasised performance, outcomes, cost effectiveness and economic competitiveness. Many of us who opposed this trajectory were attacked and sectarianism began to emerge. In a collection of his essays, published as *Sow the Wind*, Alexander (1985) wrote:

> The sectarian and totalitarian hubris that seduces some people who disagrees with one's ideas to brand one immediately as 'an enemy of South Africa' or as 'an enemy of the people' is without any doubt the greatest danger to our liberation struggle. My appeal to

> such people is to allow history to decide the questions on which we disagree fundamentally. My appeal to them is to remember the words of the prophet, 'For they have sown the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind.

Workers' Education

During the height of the struggle in the 1980s, the labour movement played an educative role not only for organised workers, but also for many other sections of the black working class. Workers brought to community organisations traditions of participatory democracy, accountability, worker-leadership and mass action as well as a critique of capitalism and a growing vision of a transformed socialist society. The development of its vision of worker education was also closely linked with community and school struggles for a People's Education. Unsurprisingly, unions were referred to not only as a 'school of labour' but also as 'laboratories of democracy', where workers could test out new ideas, arrived at new understanding, and develop and enrich collective practices (Vally, 1994). Grossman (quoted in Cooper *et al*., 2002, p. 120) writes, "Workers searched memory, each other, history, the world, political texts, for ideas and knowledge, bringing everything into their intellectual embrace".

They came up with the concept of 'moving meeting', turning buses and trains into vehicles of mass education to popularise the campaigns. Education work within COSATU (*Congress of South African Trade Unions*) also built on the growing tradition of worker cultural initiatives: at COSATU second congress in 1987, there were poetry readings, worker choirs, plays and art exhibitions. The mid to late 1980s saw the emergence of over 300 cultural locals within the federation and the rapid growth of workers' theatre (Vally, 1994). Worker plays gave expression to the feelings of alienation of workers in factory conditions and their bitter experiences of racism, poverty and arbitrary dismissals.

At the very moment at which workers were participating in mass action on a larger scale than ever before in South Africa's history, a very different process was getting under way. By 1988, it was clear that the broad liberation movement was being led to a course of negotiation with the apartheid state. The labour movement came under pressure to review its role, as well as its strategies for change and its vision of the future (Cooper *et al.*, 2002, p. 123). In line with the newly dominant politics of a negotiated settlement in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the trade union leadership responded by shifting its declared vision from that of opponent and adversary towards a stated goal of 'equal partner' with business and government. This involved participation in tripartite negotiating forums over policy development for a post-apartheid era. Increasingly, the leadership of the labour movement insisted on partnership with the former 'capitalist enemy' and a common commitment to international competitiveness and appeals for foreign investment. These changes were to have two significant kinds of impact on worker education. First, the priorities, form of delivery, and key target audience of trade union education were shifted. Second, the labour movement was to become increasingly involved in workplace training issues guided by a new commitment to increased productivity (Cooper *et al*., 2002, p. 123).

Today, workers' education is a shell of its former self. This decline - with some notable exceptions - must be situated within a wider socio-economic crisis manifested in

unprecedented inequality, high levels of unemployment, retrenchments and conditions of precarious work integral to the state's neoliberal trajectory over the past 30 years.

Many in the trade union leadership are also implicated in diminishing worker education through a combination of business unionism, bureaucratisation, malfeasance and the sacrificing of internal trade union democracy. These developments have hastened the de-politicisation of worker education when it exists, and the promotion of a narrow, 'human capital' approach to education based 'on management terms'. The latter prevents workers from being critical and conscious agents and more often than not depends on private or 'outsourced' providers of education and 'skills' training (Koen M, *et al*., 2018).

I argue that the nature of the negotiated settlement between the erstwhile dominant liberation movement and the apartheid regime, the continuation of the class character of the state (despite the discourse of human rights and development) and the incorporation of South Africa into a global market economy ruptured the education principles and practices established by civil society, trade unions and social movements in the 1970s to the early 1990s. To locate and understand the present reality including inequalities means locating and understanding the straitjacket of dominant class relations and the class formation of the present state. Understanding these social processes will reveal how the once hegemonic education vision in the liberation movement, although co-opted rhetorically and institutionalised, does not translate into tangible benefits for the majority of the poor.

Neoliberal globalisation's narrow focus on business and the market system continues to undermine and distort the purposes of good quality public education. It has the potential to negate the struggles for a fair, just and humane society, substituting these for unaccountable and avaricious global autocracies based on the power of money. We simply cannot abandon the public mandate of the state if we are to have any hope of achieving the goal of a democratic and humane society, free of corruption, accountable public services promoting decent employment and socially useful work, the provision of 'public goods' and the development of a genuinely democratic society for all citizens. And for public education to work we need motivated, professional and happy educators, competent managers and state officials, adequate resources and infrastructure, a conducive community environment, addressing the social context and consequences of poverty and proper enforcement of standards. For many communities in South Africa there is a realisation that the struggle against apartheid education is not over – this time against class apartheid.

Privatisation of Schools and Universities

In this atmosphere, calls for the privatisation of schools in all their permutations are receiving greater resonance. Advocates of right-wing reform in South Africa stridently demand a variety of responses ranging from outright privatization of education and the withdrawal of the state to various versions of market-friendly policies. Thandika Mkandawire, adapting Gramsci's famous aphorism refers to this predatory maneuvering as, "The pessimism of the diagnosis and the optimism of the prescription" (Muller, 2012).

The corporate agenda is not limited to schools and our book, *Universities and Social Justice* (Vally, 2020) discusses the trend around the world. Here I'll merely mention the issues in broad outline. Universities are confronted by renewed privatisation, intensive marketisation and a challenge to the very notion of the university as a mechanism for addressing social

inequality and facilitating the circulation of knowledge. The late Toni Morrison presciently and lyrically counseled some time ago that:

> 'There will be more of the language of surveillance disguised as research; of politics and history calculated to render the suffering of millions mute;…arrogant pseudo-empirical language crafted to lock creative people into cages of inferiority and hopelessness… whether it is the proud but calcified language of the academy or the commodity driven language of science;…It is the language that drinks blood, laps vulnerabilities, tucks its fascist boots under crinolines of respectability and patriotism as it moves relentlessly toward the bottom line and the bottomed out mind… typical of the policing languages of mastery, and cannot, do not, permit new knowledge or encourage the mutual exchange of ideas (Speech of acceptance, upon the award of the Nobel Prize for literature, Morrison, 1993, p. 18).

Increasingly, universities are recast from a public to a commodified sphere, with students as consumers and staff as sales consultants replete with corporate values and corporate planning frameworks. In the face of mass unemployment, aligning skills to the competitive global 'new knowledge economy' has become the obsession of most nation states. Solidarity and learning that addresses the self to public life and social responsibility to robust public participation and democratic citizenship is marginalised. Subjects and disciplines that have a purchase in the marketplace are valued more highly, even as critical education scholars have challenged dominant market capitalist orthodoxies that have become ascendant in framing understandings about the relationship between higher education, society and the economy (Vally, 2012).

Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) address academic capitalism whereby academic staff are channeled into entrepreneurial ventures as part of the university's income-generating ethic and the embedding of universities within the logic of academic capitalism. The relevance of academic work is linked to productivity as measured by rating and ranking scales. The theory of academic capitalism aims to explain the integration of the university into the global economy, more specifically how faculty, students, administrators and academics use "a variety of state resources to create new circuits of knowledge that link higher education institutions (HEIs) to the new economy" (Slaughter; Leslie, 1997, p. 210). It reflects the encroachment of the profit motive into the academy, and represents "a shift from a public good knowledge/learning regime to an academic capitalist knowledge/learning regime" where students become consumers and institutions the marketers (Slaughter; Leslie, 1997). Kelsey (2008) notes how the international trade, investment and economic architecture such as the World Trade Organisation's General Agreement on Trade in Services and provisions in other regional and bilateral agreements have been driven by a rapidly growing corporate global educational services sector including some universities. This development further commodifies education and limits emancipatory possibilities.

An increasing number of university administrations ardently promote the so-called Fourth Industrial Revolution (Maharajh, 2018). While technology and the development of technological skills are important, Bell (2019) cautions "But not within the existing economic system and the political and social framework that sustains it". We also need to equip students to ask critical questions (including about the political economy of technology itself, and the pedagogical and social implications of educational technology) which they can only do through

critical consciousness, to engage in democratic debate on this issue and to make informed choices about social priorities.

Policy makers and analysts in countries like South Africa are wont to borrow policies and their prescriptions largely from Europe and North America, regardless of the vastly differing histories, contexts and circumstances. These imitative approaches are adopted uncritically. In effect although many of the borrowed policies have been shown to be ineffective in the very countries of their origin, they continue to be purveyed as policies and 'best practice' useful to development elsewhere. Such policy borrowing is fostered, regrettably, not only through the work of 'expert' consultants (often from developed economies) but also by 'native' researchers who have little regard for the critical literature on this issue. They are intent on providing 'solutions' based on these ostensible 'best practices' – some of which have been severely criticised by researchers in the very countries of their provenance.

The upshot of neoliberal discourse concerning education in South Africa as elsewhere has been to ignore the problems faced by public schools and to promote market solutions through private schools, public-private partnerships, vouchers, charters, and the like. It is falsely argued that privatisation provides choices to parents, makes schools more responsive, and produces greater cost efficiencies and even better-quality education. This approach is derived from the idea that the state should have as little as possible to do with the delivery of education and other services which are best left to market mechanisms for their resolution. This proposed 'market solution' to our education crisis, even with state regulation, is less a case of a pragmatic attempt at resolving the problem than a case of ideological wishful thinking and a justification for profiteering.

Undoubtedly, despite these negative developments globally, progressive spaces, while constrained, do exist in the academy and individuals in many universities are able to connect with community organisations and social movements and accomplish valuable counter-hegemonic work. Often these spaces have been won through struggles supported by student organisations, staff unions and associations, and by pressure from organisations outside. They must be expanded through a vigorous defence of higher education as a public good and a sphere of critical democratic citizenry, and resistance against commercial and corporate values that shape the form, purpose and mission of our institutions. The emphasis on human capital theory/instrumentalism and technical rationality, simplistic pragmatism and undemocratic managerial imperatives must be countered. Proactively, initiatives should include linking programmes, projects and resources to community needs and struggles.

Forging Pedagogies of Possibility

Today, besides facing an unprecedented ecological crisis brought about by unbridled capitalist exploitation of our planet (which some have called the Capitalocene instead of the Anthropocene – Moore, J, 2016), progressive struggles must contend with other serious challenges as the latest wave of nationalist, racist and pseudo-populist politics seek to divide and rule communities and countries already fractured by years of social and economic upheaval, repression and growing inequality. These political agendas divert attention away from the real causes of today's social and economic problems.

As scholars of education and participants in many struggles for change in recent decades, many of us sense – and most certainly, hope – that notwithstanding the anti-

intellectualism that sometimes permeates communities and broader society, that new generations of young people, dissatisfied with inadequate explanations for the state of the world, are seeking ways to change it. I have encountered many young people who are hungry to learn how activist-scholars envisioned alternatives and possibilities, all as part of developing their own political, social and environmental activism – a major motivation for writing our book *History's Schools – Past Struggles and Present Realities* (Vally, 2019).

An unjust world is not inevitable. We are often accosted with the demand to produce an alternative or an emphatic TINA (There Is No Alternative) argument. The riposte to this is THEMBA (There Must Be an Alternative) or TAPAS (There Are Plenty of Alternatives). The praxis of all the movements I mentioned earlier gave rise to many possibilities which although often tentative, could have been developed further. In some cases, clear alternatives were squandered. For example, on the question of the 'clustering' of schools, Alexander, working with progressive urban planners, published a book entitled *Taking South African Education out of the Ghetto: An Urban Planning Perspective* (Smit; Hennessy, 1995) in which a detailed plan for overcoming the spatial apartheid nature of the city of Cape Town, acting as a pilot for other cities in South Africa, could be approached. The plan argued in considerable detail how the establishment of well-equipped schools at important nodal points on the main transport arteries of the city could enable "all children, regardless of colour, language group or place of residence" to attend such schools. Alexander (2010, p. 8) lamented that:

> Although complimentary copies of the book were made available to some individuals in the new bureaucracy, and the approach was discussed with and positively received by cabinet ministers and urban planners involved in rethinking the apartheid city in Cape Town, it had very little impact at the time because of the timidity and tentativeness, i.e., lack of clarity and vision, that characterised the first years of the transition. Yet, unless we get back to this approach, complemented by and working in tandem with some of the other foundational changes that are required, social and racial integration among poor and working-class children will remain a dead letter for decades, if not centuries…

Alexander was also exasperated by the lack of support he received around the importance of mother-tongue instruction and the development of historically marginalised languages. There were many other frustrations encountered and as a country we are impoverished as a result. Alexander 's approach was the idea of concrete alternatives and demonstrable possibilities in the present. His was an approach that went beyond social critique and academic analyses – beyond the boundaries constructed by the requirements of conventional scholarship since engagement was inseparable from serious scholarly activity. For Alexander the academy had the responsibility to stimulate activism and democratic practice both through the rigorous production of knowledge and the practice of teaching but also its accountability to communities.

Another example is the possibilities produced by the 'education with production' movement. It held the view that education can bring together the worlds of intellectual and physical labour and overcome the separation of 'head and hand' that characterises so much of the present education and training discourse separating the academic from the vocational.

A leading proponent of education with production, Patrick van Rensburg, after returning from exile bemoaned the fact that:

> Whereas in the past, liberation movements in Southern Africa had radical visions of broad socio-economic and political policy, and of education systems that would promote and

> serve them, today the various governments they gave rise to have almost all settled for the prevailing neo-liberal realities of a global free market…Most South Africans have tunnel vision about formal education and the capacity of matriculation to secure jobs. Many of its jobless fall prey to a burgeoning education industry, and to the diploma disease…In the course of its struggles, the ANC had looked with interest at alternatives in education and health and medical provisions. It would have looked at the potential of alternative technologies, alternatives in agriculture and alternative energy, especially in rural development, but also in housing and job-creation initiatives in towns and cities… South Africa seems now to hold alternatives in contempt, seeing them as beneath its dignity as an advanced industrialised country (Rensburg, 2001, p. 130-131).

Several implications flow from the points I have raised in this address as they relate to unemployment, poverty and inequality. We need to explore more fully the relationship between the alternative livelihoods, citizenship-based, cultural and solidarity economy activities in which especially the most marginalised sections of society are engaged *together with* the learning that takes place in the alternative activities of such communities. Such an exploration would provide a stronger theoretical, practical and organisational basis for a more robust and meaningful curriculum – not determined by the requirements of capitalist labour markets but by the requirements of a democratising society. Moreover, the alternatives suggested relative to work and learning should be consistent with progressive ways of thinking about sustainable planetary ecology. Given the urgency of dealing with climate change an eco-pedagogy is also necessary.

The education philosopher Greene (1988, p. 12-13) in her seminal book, 'The Dialectic of Freedom' suggested, as early as 1988, that the purpose of education was to provoke individuals to deal with serious social issues yet,

…Little is done to counter media manipulation of the young into credulous and ardent consumers…[and] that human worth depends on the possession of commodities, community status, a flippant way of talking, good looks…In the face of all this, school people are asked to increase academic rigor, ensure the preparation of a work force for 'high technology'…Confronting some of the most tragic lacks in society, some of the saddest instances of dehumanization, they offer promises of 'career ladders, 'board certification',… talk resembling what Kundera calls "kitsch."

The pressure of competitiveness, marketing pressure and the seduction to own the latest car, biggest house, the temptations of conspicuous consumption not helped by the example of yesterday's struggle icons is great. So how can educators empower young people to see through the deception and glitz, to see the values of solidarity, justice, the fight against discrimination and inequality as the primary ones. How can educators open students to the possibility that there may be more fulfilment to be discovered in living in a just society that "enough is as good as a feast" then living in an arrantly inequitable one? How can we help to recognise the violations in the continuing violence against women, children, LGBTI+ people and those we deem 'foreign' scapegoated because of politicians' incompetence?

Paulo Freire in his seminal work *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* calls on us to imagine a world that is less ugly, more beautiful, less discriminatory, more democratic, less dehumanising, and more humane. Donaldo Macedo (2005:11) in his introduction to The *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* writes that in his work and in his life, Paulo teaches us and the world—with his hallmark humility—what it means to be an intellectual. As always, he teaches

us with his penetrating and unquiet mind the meaning of a profound commitment to fight social injustices in our struggle to recapture the loss of our dignity as human beings. “We need to say no to the neoliberal fatalism … informed by the ethics of the market, an ethics in which a minority makes most profits against the lives of the majority. In other words, those who cannot compete, die. This is a perverse ethics that, in fact, lacks ethics. I do not accept . . . history as determinism. I embrace history as possibility [where] we can demystify the evil in this perverse fatalism that characterizes the neoliberal discourse.”

In forging meaningful alternatives and possibilities for education today means we often have to look back. I have just read a book titled *Under-Education in Africa: From Colonialism to Neoliberalism* (Hirji, 2019). The book recounts how after independence, students together with some progressive staff members such as Walter Rodney, John Saul and others contributed to making the University of Dar es Salaam a beacon of progressive scholarship. They championed decolonisation and while critically supportive of President Nyerere’s humanism and policies of *Ujamaa*, also warned of the dangers of neocolonialism - their critiques celebrated as the ‘Dar es Salaam Debates’ remain germane to revitalising the African academy today. The legendary magazines they produced *Cheche* and *MajiMaji* discussed in the book should be seen as exemplars of socially engaged and rigorous scholarship exposing the poverty of many academic journals today. It is a remarkable collection and in these bleak, dire and precarious times, with constant assaults on reason and education for liberation, it is an antidote to despair. Hirji’s injunction, not to lose hope is also a clarion call to action and a firm belief that, to quote Hirji, “…the struggle is a long term one; there are bound to be ups and downs. But ultimately, Africa and its people will triumph”.

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