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**Abstract.**

Review of a collaboration between United Nations Research Institute for Social development (UNRISD) and the Department of Peace and Conflict Research at Uppsala University Sweden. Ashok Swain discusses 'Knowledge, Identity and Power'. He links education and power through the *control of knowledge*. Knowledge he argues can be used despotically through a 'master discourse' designed to impose national identity; or knowledge is owned by people whose critical skills have been sharpened.

**Education as Social Action: Knowledge, Identity and Power.**

Ashok Swain, (ed.) 2005

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This book of nine chapters and eight contributors has sound credentials through the United Nations Research Institute for Social development (UNRISD) and the Department of Peace and Conflict Research at Uppsala University Sweden. Ashok Swain introduces the book with 'Knowledge, Identity and Power – Education Movements in the Global South'. He links education and power through the *control of knowledge*. Knowledge he argues can be used despotically through a 'master discourse' designed to impose national identity; or knowledge is owned by people whose critical skills have been sharpened. Schooling can be used somewhat repressively to assert social control. The choice of study language can be part of this. Schooling may present its own version of history: "The dominant ethnic group not only aims to monopolise the basic instruments of power, with the help of education policies it also seeks to put its distinctive stamp on the character of the national culture" (p.3). Globally therefore provision of education is not unproblematic; and in addition targets for even basic universal education are not being met. Even in the United Kingdom and United States, a quarter of the adult population are on the lowest literacy level. To assist governments, partnerships with citizen groups work with marginal groups. Some of these encourage dynamic alternative democratic ideals and are called 'new social movements' (NSM). This book contrasts these with the more descriptive 'resource mobilisation' (RM) theory which "examines the way social movements are structured, rather than the reason why they emerge or evolve" (p.11) and in which success is viewed in organisational rather than ideological terms.

Most of the book consists of case studies of voluntary education projects:

- The mobilization of African Americans for Education (the hunger for learning amongst marginalized groups)
- Communal identity developed through education in Bosnia and Herzegovina
- The problems and attempted solutions in providing universal elementary education across India
- Muslim *Madrasas* in contemporary South Asia (especially India, Pakistan and Bangladesh)
- Education among indigenous peoples in Columbia and Peru
- Education as a promoter of unity in a plural society in Malaysia
- Social movements in postapartheid South Africa.

For readers of this journal, the chapters on *Madrasas* and on Malaysia are worth further comment. The *madrasas* are depicted as uncontrolled, adhering to the

teachers of particular charismatic leaders and often rejecting other opinions. It is argued that they contribute to the under-education and underachievement of Muslim youth, devoting time to Islamic studies but having limited if any career relevance and inhibiting people from going to university. Their exclusivist attitudes view liberal education as secular and as a threat. Recent evidence of *madrasas* for girls represents progress only in part: girls may have had no education previously but they are being offered irrelevant curricula.

Malaysia, it is argued, has struggled with an education system that has tended to segregate the Malays, Chinese and Indians and they have responded with multi-racial 'vision schools' under the slogan "those who play together, stay together" (p.176). "Education is about equipping people with the knowledge and wisdom that enables them to survive in a multiracial and multicultural environment without fear and grievances and to be loyal and patriotic, tolerant and liberal, capable of differentiating truth from hearsay and objective and non-prejudicial in their thinking" (ibid.). The chapter finishes by advocating this loose form of national unity over attempts towards integration.

The book asks about the balance between the contributions to education and schooling of the state and civil society: social action is viewed as evidence of a disillusionment with the state. Both sources of education have the disadvantage that they can be misused in order to influence children's minds, attitudes and beliefs and to socialize them into a particular worldview. Examples of groups promoting agendas of hate and world terrorism are particularly in the public eye at this moment.

In his conclusion, Swain notes disillusionment with the state's ability to manage change and the consequent importance of partnerships. Spending on schooling may be poorly focused, and be propaganda rather than critically dynamic. Civic partnerships are themselves potentially problematic, as some of the case studies illustrate. There is a serious issue for debate here. Should all children globally be 'schooled' by the state, especially if this means indoctrination, demotivation and deliberate deception? Similarly, if voluntary education is of limited quality, inappropriately focused and a general waste of time, should there be controls? How can we achieve – even locally – education that is open, motivating, dynamic and intellectually stimulating? In the UK, government policies of the ruling parties have achieved only very mixed results, so what right do we have to export our educational systems and advise developing countries? This is a thought-provoking and challenging book which I thoroughly recommend.

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