Powell, L. J., & McGrath, S. (2019). *Skills for human development: Transforming vocational education and training.* **Abingdon: Routledge. Hardback £120** (190pp) ISBN 9781138100572**; paperback £34.99 ISBN 9780367182151**

Tikly, L. (2020). *Education for Sustainable Development in the Postcolonial World: Towards a Transformative Agenda for Africa.* **Abingdon: Routledge. Hardback £120 (264 pp) ISBN 9780415792943; paperback £31.49 ISBN 9780515792967**

For social activists the transformative potential of education is elusive. It is frequently affirmed, desired, and planned for, but often meets radical changes of direction or complex local conditions that undo the forward direction of aspiration. Both these books, in different ways, seek to ward off pessimistic arguments, and map a rich landscape that seeks to explain the ways that education guides social change. Both contain invocations of transformation in their subtitles, and both posit visions of education's better worlds, associated with 'human development' for Powell and McGrath, and with 'sustainable development' for Tikly. Both deploy theory as a major engine guiding education analysis and social change. This precipitates some novel insights. But in both the question of the elusiveness of transformation is somehow sidestepped. The potential for change or its opposite by people, in specific places, with particular histories appears shadowy, still an issue to be understood.

Both books are big hearted and seek to direct our analysis, critical evaluation, and actions towards undoing injustices, supporting human flourishing, and changing the world. I share these values and have similar intellectual and political affiliations with the three authors. Both books cast existing formulations of education issues in new light, approaching problems through thoughtful engagements with theory. This is a path I too have found particularly generative. But what I miss in both books is the sense of education and transformation as a lived experience involving many actors and processes of grappling with the elusiveness of change. Neither gives a detailed account of the political, economic or socio-cultural relationships that mould our unequal world, and how this shapes practices of transformation. They refer to generic inequalities, and give some brief account of selected background conditions and forms of activism. They are not histories that help us understand contemporary times and forms of education for social transformation in real lives. Instead they are conceptual primers, that seek to guide analysis. Somewhere, hidden under layers of theorising, are real lives, experiences of hardship and change, particular formations of economic, political, cultural and educational power and powerlessness. The analysis takes us some of the way towards this, but stops tantalisingly short of in-depth understanding.

Powell and McGrath knit together elements from the capability approach associated with the work of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, blending this with critical realism drawn from Roy Bhaskar and Margaret Archer. Their argument is that the capability approach centres analysis on the needs of people, in contrast to most studies of vocational education and training (VET) which focus on the needs of the economy. However, they find the capability approach lacking in nuance with regard to discussions of agency and power. In Archer's connection and temporal distinction

of structure and agency, drawing on critical realism, they find a meta-theoretical resource that leads them to formulate a 'realist capability approach' as a framework for analysis. I have questions as to whether the critique regarding the lack of concern with agency and structure in work on the capability approach is merited, as the rich array of studies of education and capabilities deal with many of these themes. But, putting those caveats aside, the argument made draws on the conceptual vocabulary of a 'realist capability approach' to analyse data collected from 20 students attending a vocational education college in Cape Town around 2006-2010.[1] These data provide insight into aspects of poverty but unfortunately, in the chapter on this issue, there is little detail on students' experiences of lack of income, limited educational opportunities, problems of health, drugs, crime and poor housing. The outline sketch of students' lives is accompanied by only very limited description of the economic and political conditions in which the data were collected and analysed.

The discussion distils some reasons students offer for enrolling in a VET college. A list of students' valued capabilities is developed, which leads the authors to identify actions that institutions should take to support the capabilities on the students' list. This is a useful guide for a direction of travel towards human development. But with only limited historical and social context provided, it is hard to interpret or evaluate either the students' list or the actions suggested for institutions.

Powell and McGrath conclude that any strategy for education transformation needs to take seriously the way that education can support turning points in learners' lives. Transformation, they stress, requires attending to learners' voices. But in addition, they argue, a deployment of their theoretical mix is required to allow a better account of VET and its role in individual lives and national development. (Powell and McGrath, 2019, 176). These are important contributions to thinking about educational transformation. But a question remains as to whether this is rigorous enough. Powell and McGrath correctly stress the importance of attending to lived experience to enhance understanding, but the depth of insight offered is somewhat undermined by the quite minimal account provided of conditions that form experience with only a very short account of the political economy of skills formation in South Africa, the political strategies and struggles entailed, and no analysis of changing global issues since 2000. There is only limited discussion of race, class, gender, age and locale. So much of the analysis turns on the theory that we lose the nuance and detail of individual lives, institutional arrangements, accommodations and challenges. The detailed 'tang' of the time and place is missing. At the end I was left with the a suspicion the authors consider that theory, not people, will do the transformational work.

The range of theories and the work they are invited to do is even more extensive in Tikly's argument. He is centrally concerned not with people, but with systems. The major focus of discussion is the terrain of global policy regimes, notably the Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA), Education for All (EfA), the Sustainable Development Golas (SDGs) and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). These policy regimes appear as major actors and their key

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[1] The date for the fieldwork is not given, and these dates are pieced together from references to some events in the text

formulations are given detailed description. The ways in which people make policy, under particular historical conditions is often hard to discern, although the significance of leaders is a key part of the discussion.

Tikly draws on many theoretical resources in discussing how policy regimes take the shape they do and what their transformative potential might be. His key explanatory move is to make a list or provide a diagram. Thus he sets out complexity theory in chapter 2 affirming six features of complex systems and concluding (p 43) that education contexts may be categorised in terms of levels of simplicity or complexity, each requiring different forms of attention. In simple contexts, he writes, cause equals effect and known procedures can bring about remedies. In complex systems regular problems are amenable to solution by experts using replicable solutions. 'Wicked problems,' he writes, such as Africa's learning crisis, may be a feature of complex systems, and not amenable to a simple solution. These 'wicked problems' require leadership to create the conditions for new kinds of action to emerge. 'Expertise is useful but not essential in these contexts as much as experience of solving complex problems and patience' (Tikly, 2020, 43). A fourth response is chaos and turbulence. But we have little guidance, drawing from empirical data as to what kinds of transformation might support greater equality, justice or sustainable. We do not get much assessment of what kinds of leadership or expertise, shaped by what kind of policy regime or form of institution leans more towards or away from transformational change and why. What sustains experience and patience and what might undo these insights?

In the concluding chapter Tikly writes about the need to build a counter-hegemonic broad-based coalition for change, but the difficult experiences of doing so is not considered. We have examples of these coalitions in, for example, the history of the Global Campaign for Education (GCE) since 2000, or various student and academics' movements in Africa in response to structural adjustment in the 1980s. Some of these histories might illuminate the transformation Tikly wants to analyse, but work is needed to substantiate claims about transformatory processes.

In concluding his argument Tikly says his approach to transformation is not prescription, but an acknowledgement that education for sustainable development is a contested process. But what forms these contestations take, and why, is not particularly clear despite the range of diagrams and lists of facets and factors. This may be because Tikly does not locate his analysis centrally in the field of comparative education or education and international development, which are concerned with historical accounts of particular kinds of education change. Instead, Tikly draws on Walby for an account of domains of development involved in complex globalisation and considers how these co-evolve and affect education systems. This list encompasses domains of the economy, the polity, civil society, violence, culture and the environment (Tikly, 2019, 65-67), which are involved in generating regimes of inequality and features of post colonial relationships in Africa. Examples from education are provided for each domain. But we do not get an assessment of the literature, either empirical or conceptual, from the field of comparative or international education that might provide insight into the delineation of a particular domain of development, and what light this throws on describing education systems, transformations and their successes or failures.

Tikly outlines many processes to encourage change including supporting educators, advancing learning systems, developing a pedagogic core that connects the relationships of learners and teachers, and facilitating movement out of the dependency trap. He touches similar issues to Powell and McGrath in a discussion of the capability approach and conversion leading to an argument about complex capabilities and skills (Tikly, 2020, 147-155). But all the good ideas touching on the different domains of development associated with transformational educational regimes remain in outline . The people grappling with these processes and the institutions in which they work hardly appear.

Both books set out to provide insight into the ways education guides social change, and both give ample conceptual material to think about this. But they do not give us the detail of what happens to transformation in practice, how elusive or sustainable it is, and why. The need for change is so immediate and overwhelming that setting up some of the conceptual underpinnings for practice is a welcome first step. But both books appear to talk more to the realm of global policy and leadership and less to the detailed delineation of what is under our feet, how we live in troubled times and what solidaristic actions to counter injustice might be important in particular settings. An enduring feature of much work in comparative and international education has been concerned with human interpretation of historical experiences, doubts, critiques, and connections across difference. Some kind of extension of the work begun in these two books is needed to understand the difficulties and the achievements of the lives we live, our forms of practice, and the analysis of education transformation we undertake. We need something that is not only theory to make change real.

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