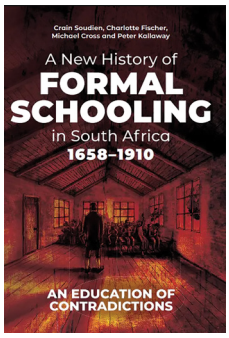
BOOK TITLE:
A New History of Formal Schooling in South Africa, 1658–1910: An Education of Contradictions



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Beyond grand narratives: Ambiguity, complexity and contradiction in South Africa's history of formal schooling

A New History of Formal Schooling in South Africa, 1658–1910: An Education of Contradictions claims a first as a history of South African schooling from the vantage point of subjugated people. While there are other treatments which privilege the perspective of the oppressed, such as those writings which have emerged from within the Non-European Unity Movement, as well as the many contributions to edited volumes in the *History of Schools and Schooling* series, the book's claim holds strong because it is the first of this nature to offer a systematic and in-depth treatment exploring the emergence and development of formal schooling in South Africa. "Formal", the authors remind, is not employed pejoratively but rather serves to differentiate between pre-colonial forms of education and cultural transmission, and the import of the formal school.

The book begins with the story of the first school in South Africa, a school for slaves, run by Pieter van der Stael, and ends in the period building up to the formation of the Union of South Africa. It adopts a historical periodisation which divides time according to education under Dutch rule, education under British rule, the impact of the mineral revolution, and the construction of the Union after the South African War of 1899–1902.

The authors adopt a Foucauldian approach in reconstructing the story of formal schooling in South Africa and this also gives the book its unique character, highlighting the ambiguities and contradictions in how this history has previously been presented. In the book, readers will encounter a polyphony of voices and be confronted with the complex and contradictory positions and stances which both the agents and the institutions appear to hold together, and which offer caution against reading history in ways which flatten the landscape or present individuals or groups in a one-dimensional manner for the sake of building a grand narrative. In this regard, the history of formal schooling may have been a history of subjection but, as the authors show, it was also a story of subjugated people subverting the purposes of such an education for domination, and also of appropriating the master's tools in acts of resistance. It is a history which does not represent Indigenous and enslaved people as totally dominated, demonstrating the agency people have even under abhorrent conditions, even if such agency is expressed in playing truant, and in this way, the text may be positioned alongside other recent publications such as *The Lie of 1652* (Tafelberg; 2020) or *The Truth about Cape Slavery* (Tafelberg; 2024). In a similar manner, missionary educators, for example, are not over-simplistically presented as the advance guard of colonialism as in Dora Taylor/Nosipho Majeke's *The Role of Missionaries in Conquest* (APDUSA; 1986). While they may have been implicated in such a role, the authors of this new history remind us that many were also criticised for undermining ruling ambitions.

At its core, the book is an invitation to recognise the complexity of human beings and presents a caution against anachronistically reading into history clear projects and plans, where much more uncertainty, contradiction and reactionary recourse existed in relation to broader social, political and economic upheaval and change. As the authors express: "...the nature of power at the Cape is that it is never either singular in its character or without its own internal contradictions. It might be a moment structured in dominance, and this dominance is, of course, historically shaped, but it is never, using Foucault's terms, fundamental or unchallenged" (p. 23). This nuanced view, it seems, is becoming increasingly necessary as an antidote to reductive understandings of race and class violence in South Africa, and also to 'great man' theories which posit particular figures as "architects" of history in ways that neglect the social conditions and ideas which came together in a particular time and place.

Returning to the conceptual framework in which *A New History of Formal Schooling in South Africa* is anchored, the final chapter, which brings the book to the formation of the Union, very strongly posits race as dominating the South African social imaginary. Race, they argue, was increasingly inscribed in law and practice and in body and mind, with education as "the premier site for shaping and refining the individual's consciousness" (p. 232), a racial consciousness. The authors put it quite plainly: "Race determines how everything is seen" (p. 232). Importantly, however, the authors' analysis arrives here through a political economy analysis which links racist thought (ideas) with both social processes (industrialisation and capitalist modernity) and political interests. In this regard, the book cautions against the limitations of both a purely ideological critique and economic reductionism, and this is not a small matter because such points of view continue to abound, potentially undermining more practical questions of what is to be done in building alternatives.

Understanding how the purposes of education are entangled with political interests and social processes and how this has played out historically is vital to how future teachers construct their own identities. The careful treatment and engagement with both existing work and archival sources makes the book well suited as an academic read to introduce students to the history of formal schooling in South Africa. While at times the vocabulary choice could have been more accessible, particularly so in South Africa where the majority of potential readers (and teachers) are not first-language English speakers, the book remains well organised and legible. Where the popular education text *The Right to Learn (*Ravan Press; 1985) has for decades been used as an introductory reader because of its accessibility and its critical point of departure, *A New History of Formal Schooling in South Africa* is a much-needed text to revive an in-depth engagement with the history of education – a critical body of knowledge which appears to have increasingly been neglected or deliberately undermined in the design of teacher education programmes.