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EDUCATION AND THE AFRICAN

Education can either be a revolutionary or a reactionary force.

At its best it combines these two elements, preserving a sort of dynamic equilibrium which, whilst preserving and passing on the cultural gains of the group, yet encourages and stimulates critical thinking on present day and future problems.

The problems arising out of this delicate balance of past and future are nowhere more clearly defined and, perhaps, more complicated than in a rapidly changing cultural situation, such as we have in South Africa today. And yet essentially these problems are the very same problems that confront the educator everywhere. One has only to probe a little below the surface of seeming dissimilarity to discover the essential sameness. Sometimes, in this country we tend to concentrate far too much on the apparent differences and the uniqueness of our situation, and thus neglect what history and the experience of others can teach us in working out our solutions to the problems of living together in a multi-racial and multi-cultural society.

It seems to me that the fundamental question in African education is: "What are we educating for? what role are we expecting the African to fill in the complex life of this country?"

The kind of answer we give to this question will fundamentally influence our viewpoint in regard to the education of the African and colour the whole of our educational policy. In the history of education there has always been the problem whether to educate for full personality development or only for a predetermined status for the person educated. Reference to the history and development of the education of the working classes in England brings out very forcibly the truth of the contention that the type of education given to a group is very greatly influenced by the position that the group is supposed to occupy in the society.

In South Africa this political aspect of the assumptions on which all education is based is further complicated by two factors - the stratification of society in terms of race, such that certain occupational opportunities are open to members of one group by mere reason of their race, whilst closed to members of the other group; (b) the clash of two cultures - one far advanced in its use of both of material and intellectual tools; the other just starting, as it were, on this long and difficult road.

We are witnessing in these days the end of an epoch - the end of more than a 100 years of missionary activity in the sphere of African education. There have been eventful years in the history of our education, and they have been highlighted by the vision, the enthusiasm and singleness of purpose of a long line of devoted missionary educators. It is unfortunate, and something to be regretted that in this period when they have been compelled to lay down their work so little has been said in high places which indicates an understanding and appreciation of the very solid contributions of missionary endeavour to the cause of African development.

A significant feature of our education under the Missions was that it was constantly sensitive to African needs and aspirations. This very sensitivity was the cause of its constant financial embarrassments. Except in the very beginnings, when the aim of the missionary was to teach the African to read and write in order to make him a better Christian, African education has developed largely as a result of pressures from time to time from the African people themselves, who saw in education an instrument for material advancement and a gateway to knowledge which was the source of power. Thus the educational authorities were many a time forced to launch out into new schemes with a minimum of financial resources. As a result of this unplanned development, African education has been consistently in crisis after crisis in regard to finance. As new needs arose and African life became more diversified the work steadily outgrew the slender financial resources of the Missions. Yet in the African view these weaknesses grew out of the very strength of the system - that it reflected the needs of the people and was in constant touch with

touch with their aspirations.

The pressure by the African people which has given force and direction to the missionary endeavour in education, has not been sufficiently taken into account in assessing the developments of the last hundred years. Too much stress has been laid on what the missionary tried "to make of the African" as though he were merely passive clay and not an active participant in the direction of his own development and in the fulfilment of his desires. This awareness on the part of the African has steadily grown during the last two or three decades. The Missions, therefore, have had to rethink their stand and give an answer to that fundamental question - "what are we educating for?" For it is quite true that in the early days the missionary had not clearly thought out these issues, and possibly brushed them aside as subsidiary to the main cause of evangelization. But in these latter days the English Missions in particular, have come to realize how fundamental this question is to the whole of African education and have had to re-state their aims clearly in terms of a "multi-racial society in which there is equality of opportunity for each person according to his gifts and abilities". Around this idea has developed during the last thirty years a philosophy of education which has coloured the whole of missionary endeavour in this field. It has not been a haphazard policy but one which has grown and developed pari passu with the growth and development of African aspirations.

Seven years ago, as a consequence of another of those financial crises referred to earlier, the Government appointed the Eiselen Commission to inquire into the whole field of African education. The Commission it seems realised quite fully the importance of clearing the ground in regard to the role that the African must play within the South African community. It, therefore, decided to face this fundamental question right at the beginning of its task.

The Commission accepted as a basic assumption that the Africans must be regarded as an independent race, and their development must therefore be channelled along separate and different lines from those followed by the other races of this country. The system of education, therefore, which the Commission recommended was a logical outcome of the acceptance of this assumption. For having once accepted this doubtful premise as basic one is inevitably led to the conclusions which form the bases of the present Bantu education policies.

In considering, therefore, the trends and tendencies which have come into African education as a result of the new Bantu education system, it is not unimportant to point out that the basic assumption, that the Bantu are an independent race - an assumption from which has stemmed so much doctrinaire policy - was never proved by the Eiselen Commission, nor is it description of the true conditions in which the African lives today when he is being drawn more and more into the vortex of a modern industrialised society.

It is claimed, however, that this new programme is "realistic"; that it is based on a recognition of what obtains - viz the social and economic circumstances of the African in South African society today.

This seems to suggest an educational programme that will enable the African to make use of his present environment - laying special emphasis on the rural environment. From a purely educational angle one might accept such a limited objective, if it were understood to be one among many such which together aim at the full development of personality and not merely at the shaping of a better human tool.

Among educationists it is admitted that one cannot educate in vacuo; the social implications of the educational process must be kept in mind. So in a good educational system a proper balance must be maintained between the dynamic and the static factors, so that progress and change can take place in an orderly manner according to the needs of the times. If the so called realistic approach means this,

we would be in full agreement; but we would be in total disagreement with an education system whose aim is to keep the African in his place, both figuratively and literally, and to give him an education that is limited both in its scope and objectives.

The second claim made for the new system is that it is based on a respect for Bantu culture; and one of its prime aims is the preservation of that culture. It is claimed that missionary education neglected this important factor, and tried to do the impossible - viz to turn Africans into black Englishmen. It is mainly on account of this exalted respect for Bantu culture, that so much stress is laid on the necessity for the use of the Bantu languages as media of instruction right through the primary school stage and possibly into the secondary school and university stage.

This is so important a matter not only for the future of African education, but for the whole of African development, that I would like to expand a little on the place of culture in education.

In tribal society education could truly be defined as "a passing on of rece gains". Culture was regarded as static. Ideals and norms were regarded as having been set in the past, and all the new generation had to do was merely to walk along the safe and beaten path and all would be well. The good man was the man who conformed in all ways and who never tried anything new. Tribal society, therefore, placed a premium on the veneration of the past for its own sake; and discouraged initiative inventiveness and new ideas. These, then, were some of the characteristics of education in tribal society. As a result it was a society that was unprogressive and resistant to change. But we now realize that for progress culture must change and seek to adapt itself to changing conditions. Modern education, therefore, if it is to fulfil its real function, must take cognisance of these rapid changes - many of which cannot be predicted - and plan out new approaches to the task of preparing the young to live a fuller and more abundant life not only in the present, but in the future.

In this process of looking "before and after" it is inevitable that some of the hallowed ways of the old culture must be shed and give place to new ways, new norms and new values. It is also self evident and eminently desirable that the decision as to which elements of culture shall be shed and which preserved must be left to the people themselves, and not be forced upon them by tutors, however well disposed they may be. Herein lies the true role of trained African leadership which must not be surrendered to others at any cost. If under this trained leadership the African people should desire to merge their mode of life into that of a larger group for economic, social or political reasons, there should be no opposition from others in the name of maintaining a distinctive and interesting culture or on grounds of mere sentiment.

We Africans, then, realise that much in Bantu ways and life is good in itself. We believe that education should conserve the best in Bantu culture, but it must at the same time give us acquaintance with the intellectual tools and social concepts and institutions of the west, so that we may learn to meet the conditions of the modern world on equal terms with other peoples.

If, then, we scrutinise the new Bantu education programme in the light of what has been said above, we cannot help but come to the following conclusions.

A. That the Bantu education programme whilst extending facilities for lower primary education is nonetheless based on a conception of Bantu society which is non-existent at the present time - a society which is still to be developed. I refer to that society where it could really be true that the Africans can be regarded as "an independent race". Such a society, some knowledgeable people claim, will be impossible to develop in our complex South Africa; yet African education in the meantime is being conducted as though such a society was

Already a fact. Should it fail to materialise, the African will have been involved in an experiment whose effects will take time to correct.

B. Although the new syllabus for the primary schools is a very good one and incorporates some of the best developments in modern educational thinking, yet by its insistence on mother tongue instruction throughout, the new Bantu education will tend to diminish opportunities and reduce horizons for a full and expanding life even in a segregated and independent Bantu community. With primary education in the vernacular, it will not be long before it becomes a matter of necessity to have high school education in the vernacular and so on to University education in the vernacular. We will, therefore, have an "educated" Bantu community whose whole mental life is nurtured on a few translations in one of the many Bantu languages, whose literature is restricted by the smallness of the language group and whose communication with the wider world will be both slow and laborious.

In this connection it might be of interest to quote from a recent leading article in the most widely read Zulu newspaper:

"The African parent on the other hand wants his child to be taught English thoroughly, because he realises that English is a great language with a great literature. He knows that to read great literature is to enrich one's life and to strengthen one's character. He is aware of its value in commerce and in understanding other African people on this continent.

He is conscious of the fact that western civilization is an aggressive civilization. To understand it he must know English well, because it is the one language that can open to him the heritage of the ages".

C. One of the tests of a good educational system is whether it is able to throw up leaders of ability and character.

In spite of the promise of full development opportunities in the future independent sphere, it seems that the training of leaders does not occupy a very high place in the priorities of the new system. Thoroughness, breadth of vision and individual excellence are being played down as over against the education of the mass of the people.

Intensity is being unnecessarily sacrificed to extensivity. And yet this need not have been so, if mission schools had been allowed to carry on their programme whilst the Government entered the field on an intensive campaign to bring those children who were not at school into school. Thus the financial resources of the Missions would have been harnessed into the good work and more money become available for African education.

D. On the other hand, it seems to me, the new Bantu education is going to bring about certain solid benefits to African education. It will increase and expand the opportunities for the attainment of minimum education by bringing more African children to school.

Through its Bantu School Boards and school committees it has brought about a greater measure of African participation in the control and administration of schools. These Bantu school boards can have a very great influence in the future development of African education if they are given real responsibility and not made to act as mere channels for decisions taken higher up.

If this real responsibility is given, it will encourage a spirit of self-help and develop initiative in our communities, where opportunities for our exercise of such qualities have been few and far between.

We are witnessing today a revolution in African education. Principles and institutions long revered are being swept aside; long laid schemes have gone awry and individual group aspirations which have been slowly built up through the years, have been rudely shaken and others have once again to be built anew, with...

with what cost in personal suffering we can never tell.

But these are the vicissitudes of a period of revolutionary change. In the meantime, the Africans are determined to accept the challenge to self-help implied in the new system; they are determined to make it work, in spite of the difficulties that confront them so that they may not lose ground in the forward march of progress which is sweeping through Africa today.

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