

# COMMENT

## Bantu Education— A Personal View

IN THEORY IT IS possible to make out quite a good case for Bantu Education, and the Government is, of course, well aware of the fact. In a recent series of advertisements, paid for by the Government, and run in *The Observer*, the opportunity was taken to advertise the apparent benefits conferred by this system. It is true that numerically the number of African children who receive schooling has increased under Bantu Education. And anyone who looks through the official syllabuses cannot fail to be impressed. Tuition is provided in a wide range of subjects, and there is little or no evidence of bias in the way that the syllabuses are drawn up. (Of course, no History is taught.) But these are facts, and it is chiefly on these that the Government propagandists must base their claims.

How does the theory compare with practice? Imagine an African child in a rural community going to school for the first time. This child must have reached the age of seven; children under the age of seven are not allowed to attend school. Why? There is a big difference in being able to matriculate at 17 or 18, instead of at 19 or 20. In the case of European children, it is common practice to send them to school in the year in which they turn five or six, and legally they must be at school when they turn seven.

Our African child, aged seven, arrives at school to enter Sub-Std. A. (Grade I). He finds himself in a classroom containing an average of about 60 children of various ages and sexes, comprising four different classes, but under the control of a single teacher. Each of these four classes has its own rigorous syllabus specifying a certain amount of time to be allotted to each subject every day. Is it humanly or conceivably possible for one man to teach four different syllabuses to four different classes at the same time and in the same room? Possible or not, it is a situation that occurs frequently in country districts. In theory the difficulties are smoothed out by making use of double sessions. In practice these sessions overlap for the greater part of the day. The subjects taught, even in a Lower Primary School, are numerous—reading and writing in English, Afrikaans and the 'mother tongue', Arithmetic, Environment Studies, Hygiene, Divinity, Singing, Handwork, Gardening and Gymnastics. In point of fact the 'mother tongue' often presents nearly as many difficulties as English or Afrikaans. Due to the breakdown of tribal life there is frequently no common 'mother tongue' and the choice of this language is, therefore, quite arbitrary.

In any case—imagine a child in the Sub-Standards having to learn to read and write and speak three languages simultaneously! Add to this the fact that most African children come from homes where there is no environmental background of knowledge or learning, i.e. books, pencils, crayons, pictures, etc., are all completely foreign elements, and their mastery and assimilation

will require considerable effort. For the average African child these three or four years at a Primary School are all the education he will ever have. How does this equip him for life in present-day South Africa? In theory, quite well. In practice, hardly at all. He has, it is true, learnt to read and write and add and subtract; *but* his knowledge of these vital elements has been fragmented into three languages. It has been further fragmented because his class, at any time, on any day, has been only one of three or four claiming the attention of the teacher. What does this mean in fact? It means that subjects are learnt by rote, parrot-fashion, by dint of constant repetition. The teacher just does not have the time to teach in a way that will ensure that his pupils fully understand what they are being taught. And learning by rote, without real understanding, is soon forgotten when the child leaves school and returns to his rural and unlettered home. It is probable that he will go out to work and that he will have little or no chance to continue the practice of those few years at school.

APART FROM THE OVERCROWDING of most African schools, and the acute shortage of teachers, the system of financing is, in fact, most inadequate. The Government frowns upon the idea of school fees. In theory again the principle is commendable, i.e. that no child should be debarred from education through the inability of his parents to pay the fees. In fact this means that it is virtually impossible to erect and maintain a country school without the active goodwill and financial assistance of the farmer or landowner. And how often does this condition obtain? In theory there are schemes by which schools may obtain furniture, books, equipment, etc., from the central authority. In practice such schemes simply do not work. They are generally dependent either upon a specified number of children attending school (in which case books or equipment are supplied for a fifth part of the total number), or upon the school having a certain number of classes (thus ruling out many Lower Primary Schools), or upon goods being supplied on a Rand-for-Rand basis (thus presupposing the existence of a substantial school fund). The children are supposed to do gardening and handwork, and to play organised games; and instructions in this connection appear in the syllabus. If they are not complied with, the school receives an unfavourable report when visited by an Inspector. But how is the necessary equipment to be obtained? The tools and seeds for gardening, the equipment for games, not to mention the bare minimum of books and classroom furniture—these all cost money. It must be repeated, in theory all these items are forthcoming; in practice the proper furnishing and functioning of the school depends upon the assistance of the owner/manager; or upon the enterprise and fund-raising abilities of the parents—and this latter factor is, of course, negligible in a country community of largely illiterate and ill-paid adults. These parents are pathetically anxious for their children to receive the education which they themselves, in most cases, have not had. But they just do not have the means, or the ability, or the necessary organisation

to set up and operate any sort of effective fund-raising system.

Permission having been obtained for the erection of a school, the Government will subsidise a small proportion of the building costs, and will pay the teacher. Should the community desire a second teacher, and be prepared to pay that teacher from their own resources, permission must first be obtained from the Government. In the case of farm schools, children from farms other than that on which the farm is situated must have the permission of the owner/manager of the school to attend, and the permission of their own employer, and the permission of the Bantu Education Department. Strict conditions of service are laid down for teachers, and they may be summarily dismissed on innumerable pretexts, including of course any sort of criticism of the Government and its works. All teachers are required to keep an intensive system of records and documents; the work thus entailed being particularly heavy in the case of one-teacher schools.

IT IS POSSIBLE THAT the position in the towns is brighter. I write only of average country conditions as observed and verified by myself. But I am inclined to doubt whether any substantial number of African schools, anywhere, has one teacher to each class. And it must be borne in mind that whenever the Government refers to Bantu Education as applied in present-day South Africa, a very considerable proportion of the total number of pupils are attending school under conditions similar to those that I have described here.

I repeat that, in theory, the Bantu Education system is reasonable. But in practice one has only to see, let alone to deal with, a community of children whose entire education will be received in the space of 4 years, in one room, under one man or woman, teaching 4 classes simultaneously in three different languages and several subjects, to realise that it is a pathetic travesty of the theory. It must be remembered too, that a great many African school-children are both under-fed and inadequately clothed; and that these factors, often found in combination, are further obstacles to the acquisition of even such little learning as is prescribed for them. It is against this background of practical fact that the suppression of the mission and other private schools can be seen for the wickedness that it was. Education in these schools may not have been scientifically balanced, but how balanced is Bantu Education? Mission school education was generally given through the medium of only one language—and largely because of this it *was* an education; conscientiously given and in tune with modern standards. In most cases it was education of a high standard. The point that is continually made by the Government is that *more* Africans are now attending school than in the 'bad old days' of the mission and other schools. But which is better—that more children should be worse educated for a shorter time, or that fewer children should be well educated for a longer time? And is Bantu Education better than mission education? Is it better than no education at all? When one has seen it in practice, and at close quarters, one is inclined to wonder. ●

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## End Street

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RHODA PRAGER

END STREET, 7.30 A.M., and the latecomers are hurrying into the factories which fill every building on either side of the street. Black, brown and white pushing, jostling and shoving to clock in on time.

Machines begin to hum and belts to move. Lays spread out on the cutting tables; electric cutters cheese paring cloth.

"Heaven help you if you gain weight . . . no seams to be let out; heaven forbid if a dress should shrink . . . today we can't guarantee materials." Cutters, machinists, pressers, checkers, supervisors; wheels turning; fingers thinking; brains remembering. And machine emergent dresses, skirts, coats, costumes, blouses . . . on and on, machines spewing chunks of material; a sleeve here . . . a skirt there . . . and a bodice rushing to get itself attached; a collar hurrying to find its place. Bundles of shapeless garments carried down to the foetid, steaming pressing rooms. The wet smell of damp cloth on wool.

Eight o'clock and office staff importantly arrive. The dust from yesterday's sweepings still rises; the throat holding smell of stale ink. In the showrooms thousands of empty garments hang emptily on their rails. Typists commence their morning tattoo, calculating machines begin their clatter. The switchboard burps. A flat, nasal voice drops through factory floors, bounces into every corner from basement to despatch; from lift to lavatory, from office to office.

"Calling Mr. Liebling, calling Mr. Liebling, please take a call." From somewhere in the building a receiver is lifted, a voice coos, "You're through now . . ." Yes, even the boss has arrived. The day is on its way. Through End Street, Market, President Streets; all those other streets bound by the weight of factories, warehouses and the rag trade.

Mr. Liebling replaces the receiver. Lights his first cigar of the day. "Did anybody promise you a cigar in Crakow? . . ." "Did anybody promise you a Cadillac in Kowno?" . . . "Did anybody promise you custom-made clothes here, there and everywhere?" "You've done it yourself boy".

It wasn't like this in the old days. Shabby Siemert Road and the house spilling over with cloth and the smell of shoddies. The machine. God how he hated it. Mirev to Minchah. Unremitting stitching and Momma always watching.

"Hurry, hurry. That order's got to go out. For today I promised."

"Yes Momma, I know, but I said I'd go out with the boys."

"With the boys he wants to go out . . . on the streets . . . with the schickses . . . better you save the money

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