

Poor English reading skill is big flaw in black education

IN A survey at some of the teachers' training colleges in Bophuthatswana a few years ago, it was found that the average reading age in English of incoming students was the equivalent of the average English first-language pupil half-way through Standard 1.

I realise that reading age tests are problematic. And, of course, it is not their purpose to assess maturity, intelligence or drive — factors that can often compensate for and even improve a poor reading ability. But in my experience of black students, particularly over the last seven years, the survey's findings would seem to be an accurate estimate.

Many will react with shock and even disbelief at a figure like this. Yet, given the circumstances, it reflects a creditable rather than a discreditable achievement. I wonder how many English first-language speakers can claim they have a reading competence of 8½ or 9 (the Standard 1 equivalent) in any other language?

And I wonder how many can read any black language at all? Very, very few. I certainly cannot. But more to the point: how many English first-language speakers have such a proficiency in any other language that they could attend a university, where that language is the medium of instruction?

So there is something very commendable in black students who, in spite of the deficiencies of the educational system to which they are exposed, have achieved a reading age of 8½ or 9 in English by the time they reach university or teachers' training college.

But the hard fact is this: such an attainment is far short of what is necessary to study satisfactorily.

In my experience, given the right environment (a good school with a good library and competent teachers) the average English first-language pupil begins to read fluently and for pleasure at about the age of 9½ or 10.

It is from this point onwards that education can really begin. For true education is derived very largely from what is read in books, and very little from what is crammed into one's head by teachers in class.

True education is something you get

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for yourself, once you have mastered the art of reading fluently and efficiently. It is the vistas opened up by the pleasures of reading that, more than anything else, will draw the young person on to the quest for knowledge.

By far the majority of our black students entering tertiary institutions have not yet reached the stage of being able to read in English for pleasure — the kind of pleasure that has turned it into a daily habit. This means not only do they not have the reading proficiency to pursue a tertiary education satisfactorily, but nor have they acquired the background knowledge that only a long habit of reading can bring.

For such students all reading, even of the most elementary texts, is still a form of drudgery, so much so that many cannot manage more than two or three pages an hour. What they do read they read with poor understanding and little or no long-term retention. Yet even at the worst of our tertiary institutions, they are expected to do a considerable amount of reading.

For many, because of their inadequate reading skill and the limited time available, this reading requirement is physically impossible. So they fall back on desperate expedients: they try to regurgitate what they hear in lectures, they 'mug up' summaries, they learn passages off by heart, and many departments (equally desperate, or indifferent) connive with them in this.

Yet the majority of these students end up with degrees or qualifications of some sort. (You may well ask *what sort?*)

The evidence is that they have improved very little on the reading ability with which they first entered college or university. They still only read under compulsion, because for them reading is still a form of drudgery.

So what we have is a bad system that perpetuates itself, producing teachers who do not read, who in turn produce students who do not read. And there is little hope of changing the pattern, as

long as schools and tertiary institutions are content with a process of certification, instead of education, and as long as there are no libraries, let alone librarians, in most of the schools, and (most important of all) as long as only a few exceptional institutions have dynamic programmes for the advancement of reading.

In a country, where English is increasingly accepted as the medium of academic instruction, for matriculated students not to be able to read English fluently and with ease is, more than anything else, what it means to be disadvantaged.

The irony is that so few are aware of this; many people think disadvantagedness can be remedied by academic support programmes, in-service training, the lowering of entrance qualifications, the lowering of standards, the handing out of unmerited passes ('pass one, pass all') etc.

What is needed is a vast undertaking in the schools: time for extensive supervised and unsupervised reading and floods of appropriate books. We're a long, long way from that.

But until it happens and the benefits are seen in the quality of entrants to tertiary institutions, there is no alternative but the introduction of a bridging year for disadvantaged students, a year in which the mastery of English is the main focus of attention. If, that is, we take black education seriously, and do not wish to continue with the farce that it is.

In 1968 the University of Bangalore in India, with an intake of students much the same as ours in this country, introduced such a compulsory bridging year, and soon the students began to reap its benefits, and the university to turn out better graduates.

The person largely responsible for this was Prof. Deryck Nuttall, who retired a few years ago as Director of the Institute of Education at Unibo. In his account of the introduction of the course he said: 'The introduction of this (bridging) year made it possible for the university, without compromising degree standards, to be flexible about entrance qualifications, thereby making some allowance for students whose unimpressive school-leaving achievements were often the result of ineffective teaching.' (Note: Students are only allowed to register for a degree, when they have passed the bridging course.)

But reading is the thing. There is no time (in education) too precious to be spent on its mastery. ●