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# Education chief faces 'Who to blame?' storm

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WHEN the last echoes of gunfire die down over Soweto and the last school child has been buried, one man will find himself at the centre of the storm as to whether or not the bloodshed could have been averted.

He is Mr W. C. Ackermann, Regional Director of Bantu Education, and the man responsible for the Soweto area.

Mr Ackermann has the final say over the medium of instruction in Black schools. Community leaders say he has persistently refused to listen to the demands of the school boards and adopted a high-handed and arbitrary method of dealing with Black people.

In 1974, when the four Tswana School Boards in Soweto presented him with a memorandum highly critical of the new ruling that primary school children must learn half their subjects in Afrikaans, his reaction was to dismiss the four chairmen of the boards and to reply curtly that his department

would deal with the boards only if they came to him individually.

The schools' memorandum said that:

● Parents should have the right to choose the medium of instruction for their children.

● It was impossible to expect 11-year-old children to be trilingual, particularly when most teacher training institutions used English, and no extra teachers competent in Afrikaans had been appointed.

● The 50-50 ruling was contrary to the guide laid down for school principals by the department.

The guide states that a school has the right to decide for itself whether to teach in English or Afrikaans.

When the school boards approached Mr Ackermann individually, as he requested, members claim they were told their children would learn in Afrikaans whether they liked it or not.

"It was a take it or leave it

attitude," said one who did not wish to be identified. "When we questioned this, he said it was Government policy."

This year, at a meeting between the Meadowlands School Board and parents, it was decided that the medium of instruction should be English.

All nine members of the school board signed a circular to this effect which was sent to 14 schools in Soweto. Shortly afterwards Mr Ackermann sent letters of dismissal to the school board chairman, Mr Joseph Peele, and Mr Abner Letlape, an executive member.

The other seven members resigned in protest.

In March the board members were called to a meeting with Mr Ackermann and Mr J. E. Grobelaar, the circuit inspector.

Mr Peele said they were told they would all be reinstated — on condition that they undertook in writing not to interfere in any "professional matter", and that if in doubt they would consult Mr Ackermann.

The meeting ended in stalemate. Mr Ackermann eventually reinstated the seven who had resigned.

He told them that they made up a quorum of the board and should withdraw the circular instructing principals to teach in English.

The school board has so far refused to comply with this instruction.

Mr Gideon Rousseau, secretary of Bantu Education, said he was unaware of any animosity between Mr Ackermann and the school boards. He knew of only one incident, that concerning the Tswana School Boards.

The question which will now be asked is, could Mr Ackermann have adopted a more flexible attitude and thus alleviated a situation which was becoming increasingly tense.

Mr Ackermann himself says that any person who believes that Afrikaans has anything to do with the outbreak of rioting is a fool.

"I will only say this: that no school board discussed this matter with me. I have reported to my secretary and he is quite aware of what is going on.

"It should be clear that Afrikaans has nothing to do with these riots. Only one of the secondary schools concerned offers instruction through the medium of Afrikaans. The Black universities are all 100 per cent English.

"Our attitude has nothing to do with it and that's all I am prepared to say.

"You people allow Black people to publish anything they like, and so I have decided never to talk to the Sunday Times or the Star again.

"I'm putting the phone down now."

David Barritt