

innovation and development than on radical transformations.

In considering the dilemmas of choice facing Peoples Education the liberal response is guided by the two central commitments of liberal political theory – that each person should enjoy liberty commensurate with the fact that such enjoyment does not deprive another of his liberty and that social resources should be employed to maximise the position of the least well-off persons in the society.

Taken together, these principles point toward a very open educational system in which a wide variety of resource inputs (private/public/parastatal) would be drawn together within a multi-path system designed to serve a number of different sectors of the population in different ways. The goals would be to maximise the volume of resources available for education and to stimulate the innovative capacities of the system as a whole. In the use of state

resources planners and administrators would be obliged to demonstrate the ways in which their programmes would maximise the position of the least well-off.

The liberal tradition in South Africa, in both politics and education, has been dominated by white people and Eurocentric perspectives, but there is no reason why this should be seen as something intrinsic to liberal thinking. Indeed, as Charles Simkins has recently argued, liberal traditions have taken deep root among Black South Africans. In the political formulations which must follow the populist origins of Peoples Education, it is not unreasonable to hope that liberal educational thought and practice will find a new group of proponents, new perspectives, and a new base of authority, within South Africa. The dangers inherent in a state centralised system, whether constructed on a nationalist or a doctrinaire socialist platform, are too serious to allow the liberal case to go by default.□

by M. van Wyk Smith

WHAT ARE WE EDUCATING THEM FOR?

A few months ago I was invited to address final-year students in the Rhodes University Faculty of Education. In a country where and at a time when education has become the very locus – indeed, a major issue – of ideological division and the struggle against repression, the topic on such an occasion dictated itself.

Within a few months of my talk, almost everyone of the young people before me would be standing in front of a classroom, and amid the chaos of settling in, preparing lessons, finding where the register, the chalk and the stationery were kept, coaching the swimming team, editing the school magazine, organizing the PTA, and marking 30 essays twice a week – amid all this one would hope that at least at the back of their minds there would be a persistent still small voice asking: “What are we educating them **for?**”.

I hoped that I would insult everyone in my audience if I were to have suggested that they might have been under the misapprehension that in January 1987 (or whenever) they would all walk into the sunny, smiling classrooms of South Africa, ready to impart wisdom.

Most of them knew that the reality was far otherwise, but the subject seemed worth pursuing, and readers of **Reality** might like to share these thoughts.

For a start, many of South Africa's classrooms are at this time cold and closed, locked up because of intransigence on the one hand, rejection on the other, and naive notions of education on both sides. “Revolution now, education later”, or “Pass one, pass all” or “Education of the people, by the

people for the people” rank about equal in naivety and intellectual stultification with old faithfuls such as: “Separate but equal education”, “Keep politics out of education”, and “Christian National Education” (which, as Ernie Malherbe pointed out many years ago, is neither Christian, nor national, nor education).

So the very first, and I should say the very least, task to which a new generation of teachers has to commit itself is to open up all the classrooms, physically and spiritually, to a new order, a new concept of an open society, and a new compassion among all South Africans. Their predecessors have failed to solve the problems; they and the children they will be teaching will have to do better; they can hardly do worse.

But not all the classrooms are locked up. What's happening in those (or at least some of them) that are open? The week before my talk Herman Gilliomee had quoted in his regular column in the **E.P. Herald** a speculation by Ken Harts-horne (perhaps this country's most respected authority on Black education) that by now irredeemable damage has been done to a large proportion of the black schoolgoing generation, expressed by the fact that only 7% of Soweto matric candidates last year were successful. A concept of education, based on rote learning and developed in a context of frustration, demoralization, and contempt for the very educational system itself, has emerged which makes its pursuit, even among the willing, virtually pointless.

In certain areas – certainly in the Eastern Cape, heartland of Rhodes University – 1987 will mark the third consecutive year

of virtually no senior schooling. To this must be added the chilly realization that the De Lange Commission Report, responsible for so much educational euphoria a few years ago, now finally stands revealed for the cruel academic hoax the government had all along intended it to be.

It would be a mistake to think that the resulting psychosis of demoralization and rejection is limited only to Black schools. Young people are sensitive, and the machinery of repression as well as the atmosphere of what I would like to call the negativization of education which is being publicly generated because of what happened to De Lange and what is happening in Black education, have already left their mark on White education as well. Indeed, the very fact that we have to go on speaking of "Black" education and "White" education contributes to the steady destabilization of *all* education in South Africa.

To this must, of course, be added the immeasurable emotional and spiritual damage caused to the very fibres of our intellectual life as a result of repression, censorship, boycotts, detentions, violence, and fear. They say that damaged brain cells can never be repaired or replaced. I have a fear that the communal brain cells of our whole society, as evidenced in intellectual debate, academic freedom and the unfettered pursuit of knowledge and creativity are being irreparably damaged in just this way.

At the very least, the repairs will have to take as many generations of school-going children to be effected as did the original damage, and that has been many years.

But, some of my aspirant teachers might have been tempted to say, surely somewhere, perhaps even in many places, education is proceeding quite calmly and thoroughly. Look at us, they might have said, we have been reasonably well educated; some of us, indeed, perhaps better than in any but a few other countries in the world. Surely, in our best schools (at least the White ones) some very fine teaching is taking place.

Precisely. But here I had to come to my final and perhaps most distressing area of concern. We have a new phenomenon in South African education – it's called "Education for Emigration". The **Weekly Mail** of 8 August 1986 listed some disheartening emigration statistics for 1985, recording a net immigration deficit of several thousands, pointing out that the greatest loss was among professional people, including some 246 doctors alone. We face the devastatingly ironic prospect that the better the education which we provide is, or becomes, the better we may be preparing people to leave. I did not wish to embarrass my audience by asking those who planned to leave South Africa in the near or approximate future to put up their hands, but I guessed the request would produce a result I should rather not have wanted to know.

Finally, however, I could not simply walk away from either these students or the challenge I had thrown out at the beginning. To the question: "What are we educating these kids **for?**," did I have an answer?

My mind turned to literature, firstly to Henry James's great novel, **The Portrait of a Lady**. Early on in the novel the heroine, Isabel Archer, is offered a very advantageous marriage, but she instinctively knows that to accept it would be to opt out of life, life with all its vicissitudes, chances, disasters, excitements. Speaking to her suitor, she says:

"I can't escape unhappiness," said Isabel. "In marrying you I shall be trying to . . . It comes over me every now

and then that I can never be happy in any extraordinary way; not by turning away, by separating myself."

"By separating yourself from what?" (asked Lord Warburton, her suitor).

"From life. From the usual chances and dangers, from what most people know and suffer." (140-41)

But some 300 pages later Isabel, having made a disastrous marriage to someone else, now dreadfully unhappy, is still convinced that her original decision had been right, for, as James puts it:

Suffering, with Isabel, was an active condition; it was not a chill, a stupor, a despair; it was a passion of thought, of speculation, of response to every pressure. (461)

This view of suffering as an "active condition" is, of course, an existentialist one, and it forms the theme of that greatest of all existentialist novels, Albert Camus's **The Plague**. The novel recounts an outbreak of bubonic plague in the Algerian city of Oran, but it is clear from an early stage that Camus sees the plague as a symbol of pestilence of a much wider moral import against which humanity has to contend ceaselessly – the pestilence of injustice, inhumanity, poverty, cruelty, to name only some of its manifestations.

The book grows from, in the words of one of its characters, "the need to make a statement against the pestilence" (298) and from the conviction, in the words of another, that "the social order around (us is) based on the death sentence" (226), for the bacillus of the pestilence is in us all. Eventually one of the two main characters, Tarrou, who succumbs to the plague, sees his own commitment clearly:

All I maintain (he says) is that on this earth there are pestilences and there are victims, and it's up to us, so far as possible, not to join forces with the pestilences. (229)

And right at the end of the book, the other main character, Dr Rieux, who survives, decides

to compile this chronicle, so that he should not be one of those who hold their peace but should bear witness in favour of those plague-stricken people; so that some memorial of the injustice and outrage done them might endure; and to state quite simply what we learn in a time of pestilence: that there are more things to admire in men than to despise.

None the less, he knew that the tale he had to tell could not be one of a final victory. It could be only the record of what had had to be done, and what assuredly would have to be done again in the never ending fight against terror and its relentless onslaughts, despite their personal afflictions, by all who, while unable to be saints but refusing to bow down to pestilences, strive their utmost to be healers. (278)

So, in wishing these young teachers well in their future careers, I could only trust that they and their young charges would always be healers, part of the cure and not part of the pestilence.□

REFERENCES

Henry James **The Portrait of a Lady**, World's Classics (Oxford: O.U.P., 1981)
Albert Camus **The Plague**, tr. Stuart Gilbert. Modern Library (New York: Random House, 1948).