

# BANTU EDUCATION

(A summary of several articles  
by Dr. W.G. McConkey).

Since the passing of the Bantu Education Act in 1953 the education of Africans has become "Bantu Education"—a system designed, on unsound principles, for Africans alone, a system also designed to be ancillary to the political doctrines of apartheid.

Thus "Bantu Education" is from the beginning unacceptable to liberal thinkers, black and white alike, and, as might have been expected, it has limited the freedom of teachers and therefore deprived the African community of many able spokesmen and leaders.

Yet it might have produced in practice better results than its theoretical foundations might have warranted. Apologists for the system have tried to show that this is the case. Except for the undeniable fact that far more children are attending school than was the case when the new era began, the statistics adduced cannot stand up to analysis.

And analysed they have been patiently, honestly, skilfully, over two decades by Dr. W.G. McConkey, former Head of the Natal Education Department. Dr. McConkey has fought steadily and persistently, often with able helpers, sometimes as a lone crusader, and his stand for truth and reliable statistics should earn him the appreciation of all liberals. A summary of his research is given in the May 1972 Number of "Theoria", the journal of Studies in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences of the University of Natal, but this is only the culmination of studies published in many journals over many years, all of which have contributed to this present survey for "Reality".

One of the first results of the Act was to take African education almost entirely out of the hands of the Churches and Missions. Even if one should be a firm believer in the secularisation of education, there is reason for real regret at this decision. It is a great pity that the Government did not build its own schools in competition with the Church schools, and see which system was the more efficient and the more popular with parents. A few Church schools did survive the holocaust. An analysis of matriculation results in Natal in 1970 shows that 5.56 per cent of pupils of Church schools obtained First Class passes as against 4.26 per cent of Government Schools, and that only 14.28 per cent of the pupils of Church schools failed as against 18.03 per cent of the pupils of Government schools and 38.26 per cent of the pupils of Community schools. The writer knows of at



Dr. McConkey.

least one Church school which has twice secured 100 per cent of matriculation passes: he knows of no Government or Community school with such a record.

Church schools moreover secured for African education the services of many able teachers who have not been fitted into the new Government schools, and they allowed a freedom of experimentation which cannot be expected under a centralised State-directed system.

One of the results of "Bantu Education" was the re-imposition of fees and the insistence on pupils paying for all their own books — the reversal of two valuable achievements in African education when it was under the ministerial control of J.H. Hofmeyr. Step by step, slowly, almost reluctantly, the Bantu Education Department has moved towards an amelioration of these first harsh decisions. Nevertheless a recent prospectus of a *Government* school shows the expenditure on books by parents as R20 for Form I, R30 for Form II, R12 for Form III and R40 for Form IV.

The abolition of school feeding was another early result of the new system. This was an utterly indefensible step, especially in view of the widespread diseases caused by malnutrition among African children. The opinion of those who saw the school feeding system in operation is overwhelmingly in favour of it. It was good in itself, and it produced appreciable results in the ability of children to cope with their school work. In some cases private enterprise has filled the gap caused by the Government's deplorable decision. The writer personally knows of one case where schools along a whole valley are fed by the activity, and at the expense, of the privileged European women of the neighbourhood, and the activities of Mrs. McKerron and her helpers in the Grahamstown Locations are well known. But many, indeed most, schools which once received free meals are without them.

After twenty years of "Bantu Education", the ratio of pupils to teachers is incredibly high. In some schools it is manageable, but in almost every case higher than the ratio in white schools. Dr. McConkey's most recent survey shows a ratio of 1 teacher to 58 pupils in Pietermaritzburg urban schools, 1 teacher to 72 pupils

in the neighbouring village of Edendale and 1 teacher to 89 pupils in the Pietermaritzburg rural schools. These figures are based on the number of teachers covered by Government subsidy. Parents have, out of their poverty, raised funds for additional teachers and thus reduced the Edendale ratio to 1 : 68 and the Pietermaritzburg rural ratio to 1 : 83. In one school, two teachers must teach 339 children in Sub-Standard B. This otherwise insoluble problem is dealt with by the use of double sessions.

The system of double sessions (for some obscure reason often referred to as the "platoon" system) is widespread. It has many adverse results. It is hard on the teachers who have to repeat in the afternoon lessons already given in the morning, and hard on the pupils who get less than what should be the minimum time allocated for lessons. What could perhaps have been justified as a temporary emergency provision has become a regular feature of "Bantu Education".

Enough teachers could be found to make it possible for double sessions to be abolished, and for the ratio of pupils to teachers to be brought down to a reasonable figure, but the trouble here is finance. There is not enough money to pay the additional teachers. This is due to the system of fiscal segregation, which, though somewhat modified, is still a powerful limiting factor in Bantu education.

**The principle that the African community should provide the funds for its own advancement is as utterly absurd as if slum-dwellers were asked to provide the funds needed for ameliorating slum life. While the Government has moved from absolutely strict fiscal segregation, the system by which Bantu education is financed involves the fixing of a ceiling which cannot be passed however great the needs. The long-term remedy is the increase of African wages to the point where there is no need to have separate financial systems, or, at the very worst, to the point when African contributions to revenue can provide for all the needs of African education. It is noteworthy that, just before he fell from office, J.H. Hofmeyr had burst the existing ceiling and was financing African education from the Consolidated Revenue Fund.**

One of the problems which the "Bantu Education" authorities are facing is that of language teaching. Before 1953 the lower classes were taught through the medium of the local vernacular and the higher classes — the exact year of the transition varied in the different Provinces — through the medium of English. The vernacular language, and sometimes Afrikaans, were studied as subjects. It is difficult to find fault with the "Bantu Education" authorities for wanting to give Afrikaans a better place in the schools. The raising of the status of the vernacular language (Zulu, Xhosa, Sotho, etc.) was in itself a wholly right aim. But the result has been to lower markedly the standard of English in the African schools.

An interesting illustration of this is the action of a committee consisting on the whole of very liberal-minded people, which runs a Schools Speech Contest in Natal. Reluctantly, in order to secure the full co-operation of the Education Departments concerned, the Committee felt obliged to institute separate European and "Non-European" contests. Now it has had to take the African schools out of the latter group and institute a special African contest because the standard of English of the

African children was so much below that of the Coloured and Indian children that African schools had no chance of winning the prize.

However desirable it may be to improve the status of Afrikaans and of the African languages in the schools (and the writer personally believes that this *is* desirable), there is no doubt that African parents and African political leaders are strongly in favour of reverting to the pre-1953 system when English had the pride of place which it has since lost. Parents feel that from an economic point of view English is vitally important because young people who have not mastered it have little chance of securing a "good" job. Whether this is the best standpoint from which to criticise school curricula may be doubted; but that it is substantially true as a fact of life cannot be gainsaid. When the Milner régime gave an inadequate place to Hollands in the schools of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State, the parents, aided by the Church, were able to bring into being independent Christelike Nasionale Onderwys schools, but this is impossible for African parents since under the Bantu Education Act it is an offence to conduct an unregistered school.

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African health cannot fairly be considered as a major responsibility of the Bantu Education Department. Still the authorities have abolished school feeding, and this throws some onus on them for dealing at least with the diseases of inadequate nutrition. In the end the problem of health is in large measure a problem of wages. African health will improve as African economic status improves. No doubt some adult education is needed to combat malnutrition as distinct from under-nutrition.

Until the *desideratum* of a fair and equitable economic system is reached, something much better than we have at present in the way of medical inspection and specialist medical services is needed.

Statistics can be made to prove almost anything. One of the greatest contributions of Dr. McConkey in the field of "Bantu Education" is his ruthless analysis of statistics which could mislead incautious members of the public.

A famous Scottish divine was once heard by his niece walking up and down his study ingeminating, "Statistics, statistics, statistics." "What's the matter, Uncle?" his niece enquired. "Are they worrying you about statistics?" "No, Maggie, my dear," he replied. "I've just got my new dentures, and if I can say "statistics" I can say anything." Similarly it may be said that if we can believe all the statistics with which we are regaled we can believe anything.

**"Bantu Education" is the product of muddled thinking on the part of people some of whom at least have been well-intentioned. We can only test it by its results. In the view of many of the parents and more of the teachers, and nearly all the leaders of African thought, it has failed. Liberal South Africans do well to press for a radical revision of the system.□**