

https://dspace.org/

The contribution of the private schools to education in South Africa

De Lisle, Michael H.

1976
Johannesburg College of Education
https://hdl.handle.net/10539/27570
De Lisle, M.H. (1975/1976). The contribution of the private schools to education in South Africa. Symposium: A Journal of Education for Southern Africa, pp. 71-75.

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

the contribution of the private schools to education in south africa

M. H. DE LISLE

Religious affiliations

What has been the major contribtuion of our private schools? The main answer is that they are Church schools, dedicated to the teaching and practice of religion, that they are concerned about respect for other people, and that they strive for the highest standards in their work and games. It is easy to make sweeping claims, and this article will attempt to provide some substance for them. The reader should not think that these claims are made in any sense of exclusiveness, for the writer is very well aware of the excellent work being done in schools within the departmental organisation,, and he knows well that comparisons are odious.

There are many private schools in South Africa, those of the Roman Catholic and Jewish faiths, as well as the commercial colleges. The present article concerns only the schools which are members of the Conference of Headmasters and Headmistresses of South Africa (HMC), with which the writer has his acquaintance. Much of what he says will apply, **mutatis mutandis,** to the other schools as well.

A considerable proportion of the 50-odd private schools which have been established over the last 125 years are Church foundations. Particularly the Church of the Province of South Africa, more generally known as the Anglican Church, and the Methodist Church set up schools which should impart the tenets of their particular faith. The Church tie today is not a financial one, and in fact few, if any, schools receive money from the Church with which they are associated. Rather it is a tie of observance and adherence. The constitution will require that the school should provide services according to the pattern of their Church, and many have a resident Chaplain who is a full time member of the teaching staff. Others may call in a Minister from a parish in the vicinity. The Bishop of the Diocese is generally the Visitor of the Anglican schools, and has definite powers in the appointment of the Head and Chaplain. The schools, which are not attached to any particular denomination, value their independence and are still firmly Christian in their observance and practice. Their Heads will invite clergy from a variety of denominations to take services and exercise pastoral care. In more than one school a Dutch Reformed Minister is regularly invited. A debt that must not be overlooked is that owed to the religious orders who have provided the inspiration and the staff for some of the schools, particularly in their early days. These fathers and sisters were people who left an enduring mark on the Church schools, and even though in most cases they have now been replaced by lay staff their tradition stands firm. Two orders of particular note are the Community of the Resurrection based at Mirfield, and the Community of St. Mary the Virgin from Wantage.

Benefits of the Church schools

The permanence of religious influence on the young men and women who leave the Church schools is a vexed question. It is a commonplace that there is a period of revolt during adolescence, and the opportunity to shake oneself free of compulsory chapel attendance fits well with the assertion of independence. Frequently one hears the assertion, "I've been forced to go to Church for long enough, and I will never go back again", but there may well be a return later. If there is a firm foundation of religious knowledge and practice, there is the chance of returning to what is familiar. If no foundations have been laid, the return is clearly impossible. The school is naturally not the only influence at work. But if a boy or girl has no religious influence at home or in the parish Church, and also has none at school, then the three pastoral opportunities have all been missed. In many cases the school provides the only religious background for its pupils.

Another searching question concerns the number of vocations from Church schools to

holy orders or teaching. One would dearly like to know of more than in fact there are. There are many devoted Christians who were not at Church schools; there are many people who are casual about religion who were at Church schools. But the reverse of each statement also applies. One never knows when the training will prove of importance. At least boys and girls who have grown up in familiarity with sincere worship enhanced by the beauty of architecture, music and ceremony are willy-nilly heirs to a powerful tradition. The school that practises as well as preaches its religion is establishing that tradition all the more firmly in the minds of its pupils.

Compulsory chapel attendance

Compulsory attendance at worship has long been a bone of contention. If pupils are allowed to miss services, they miss instruction of importance and the opportunity of corporate activity which embraces the whole school, staff and pupils. This may have its own intrinsic value, even though more or less veiled coercion is needed to maintain it. However, some very interesting experiments with voluntary attendance at chapel have been tried recently, with good results.

The Church school as a caring community

If the first commandment is to love God, the second is to love your neighbour. A school that makes the practice of religion its distinguishing feature must pay serious heed to human relationships. The closely-knit society of a school that has a substantial proportion of boarders is a good arena for learning by trial and error how to rub shoulders. Relationships between pupils, and between staff and pupils are constantly tested, with plenty of initiative from the pupils. They have an uncanny way of finding out weaknesses, whether in teachers or in their fellows, and then playing on those weaknesses. No society is exempt from human frailty and so there will be plenty of experience in disobedience, selfishness, unkindness, dishonesty and dishonour for any child who keeps his eyes open. The importance of the "caring community" is that these deviations can be met and recognised and dealt with in a controlled situation. Such experience is not just child's play, but establishes lessons that remain valid throughout life. If the school succeeds, one hopes that society at large will not later breed disillusion.

Small numbers are a distinguishing feature of the private schools. Classes seldom exceed 25, and Houses, whether for boarders or day boys, allow a member of staff with one or two house tutors to know thoroughly the pupils under his particular care. The same applies in games and other extra-mural activities, so that any pupil can reckon on being well known to at least three members of staff, form teacher, house master or mistress, and games' coach. Supervision of this sort ripens into friendship, with the time of leaving school as the watershed.

A small and closely knit community will depend on careful discipline and organisation for its viability and happiness. Most of the HMC schools are conservative, with plenty of tolerance for innovation. Short back and sides and straight-laced garments are not the **sine qua non** of a good school. Comfort and common sense are much more satisfactory criteria. The important factor in the school community is the obligation of kindness towards other people. Courtesy and respect are the prime objectives. When these are the rule there will be little opportunity for selfishness and laziness, for bullying and teasing. If the careful and delicate rules for playing chess or driving in city traffic are essential for the general safety and pleasure, how much more so the demands of taking notice of your neighbour, difficult though it may be to care for him as much as for yourself. Obviously sanctions are necessary to limit the deviations from acceptable behaviour. In most boys' schools the stick is still used albeit sparingly these days. It remains a satisfactory punishment, provided that it is used moderately and justly, in a way that does not prejudice the fundamental mutual respect between executioner and victim. For petty offences the fashion is for practical punishments: repeating a slovenly-done piece of work or doing practical jobs about the grounds. Prefects as well as staff have disciplinary powers. Not so long ago prefects had the power to beat in boys' schools, but this has disappeared. It was a heavy responsibility for a boy to carry, and lack of experience could on occasion lead to barbarities. Fagging is now mostly regarded as a means of putting new boys under the tutelage of a senior who can guide them in the traditions

of the school. The danger of a fag who becomes a slave is recognised and avoided as far as possible. It is very easy for a senior to indulge in selfishness and laziness, and to court popularity rather than respect, but the danger is not sufficient to forbid the opportunity of learning crucial lessons of leadership. It is noteworthy that staff members, and particularly housemasters, very seldom have to overrule boys' opinion expressed in voting for prefects. Sound public opinion does accept the right criteria.

Church school and snobbery

At this stage mention should be made of the common charge of snobbery and exclusiveness against the Church schools. It is ironical that the sheer cost of maintaining schools outside the public educational system imposes on them the membership drawn from the affluent part of society. The generous subsidies given in two of the provinces do something to help this, and most private schools offer scholarships and bursaries, the latter in cases of need, and the former to encourage academic excellence. The costs of providing services are increasing sharply and yet the demand continues unabated, particularly for day boy places near home in the cities. The older fashion of sending a child 500 miles from home for three months on end has changed, and there is a growing awareness of the need to keep families united. There are many more boarders now in schools near home than there used to be, as this is regarded as a privilege for a boy which provides him with experience invaluable when he needs to stand on his own feet in the army, at university, and later on in life. The parent who is willing to pay through his taxes for the state educational system and still pays private school fees on top of tax must be convinced of the value his children receive.

In some centres the heads of private and state schools meet regularly for discussion of questions of common concern, whether academic, athletic or social. Such meetings have proved the identity of interest of people who are striving for the same ideals. There is no question of a holier-than-thou attitude among the private schools. It is safe to say that the staff of private schools resent the label of exclusiveness so often pinned on them by the Press, and feel that snobbery and the power of money are evil forces to be minimised at all costs in their work and influence. Pupils come from a wide variety of home backgrounds — as wide as the law allows. There are many Chinese pupils, and Christian schools welcome Jews and pupils not of their own Christian denomination. There are citizens of other countries whose parents are temporarily resident in South Africa. Diplomats' children bring different experience to their membership of the community. Countrymen and townsmen bring their differing values. All these blend into a sound amalgam.

School organisation

The head of an HMC school teaches on an average perhaps half the normal timetable of his colleagues. He regards this as essential for getting to know the pupils in the school in one of the essential aspects of their membership. This is often in divinity or general knowledge, or else in his own specialist subject. This means that a great deal of his administrative work is done at home and at night, as afternoons must be devoted to interviews and watching games. If the head has his own experience of pupils' behaviour and ability in the classroom and on the sports fields, he is then well equipped to lead the team of his staff members in discussing and appreciating the qualities of particular pupils. The vice-principal is normally a full-time teacher, often with responsibilities for games or other activities, who, again in his spare time, finds time for the administration of examinations, the timeable, and liaison between head and staff. In boys' schools the housemaster has a position of particular responsibility. He is the executive authority in charge of anything up to 100 boys, and he must know all of them intimately, so that he can advise, help, mould, encourage and console, with the fullest possible awareness of each boy's family conditions. The housemaster must be able constantly to consult colleagues about boys in his house, and make forceful recommendations to them and to the head about what he regards as desirable in their interest. In girls' schools, the scarcity of spinsters who are willing to give their lives to service of a school creates a serious problem. Resident staff are few and far between, and schools depend increasingly on the services of married women who attend to their families when the day's teaching is over. The housemistress in a girls' school is not

often one of the teaching staff, but rather has supervision of boarders as her sole duty. This type of post generally attracts older women, who may well be widows. Many of the HMC schools now try to provide accommodation on the property for all men on the staff whether married or single. This allows the masters to give fully of their time and enthusiasm, and the range of interests which become available will be discussed later. It is common to find a schoolmaster reading the morning paper in the few minutes of repose before dinner at night. A further attraction for HMC staff members is the opportunity of help towards overseas travel for refresher courses, visits to schools working on different patterns, and strengthening academic knowledge by travel.

Academic objectives

Academic excellence is a dominant objective of the private schools. Staff members must be well qualified if these schools are to stay in business. Schoolmasters and schoolmistresses generally bring considerable ability to their work, and this is strengthened by wide experience. Classes are small, and there is a minimal need for extra tuition out of school. The facilities are sound. Sometimes classrooms will be older and shabbier than smart new buildings in neighbouring state schools. However, good spirit is more important than the mere accommodation.

For science blocks, the HMC schools have been most fortunate in receiving substantial grants from the Industrial Fund which within recent years has allowed all the senior schools of the group to have up-to-date and efficient science accommodation. The success of the private schools in the Mathematics Olympiad and the National Science Week show good results for this endowment of science and mathematics teaching. The private schools would claim to lead the intelligent pupil to the heights, and to help the pupil of modest ability to use it to the full. Teachers who are not rigidly tied to a syllabus but can vary the work according to their own particular interest will invoke enthusiasm and teach effectively.

Church Schools and progressive education.

Freedom for experiment is a claim dear to the private schools. They have enjoyed considerable freedom to implement ideas of their own or ideas gathered elsewhere and adapted to local conditions. The English practice of the VI Form or post-matriculation class is one of the most important. This is generally a luxury for half a dozen or a dozen boys, and before the war this was sufficient preparation for immediate entry into Oxford or Cambridge. Today entry requirements are too high to allow this, but schools which have VI Form normally take university first-year examinations as the goal. Work done on a tutorial basis, and the opportunity for younger pupils to mature and carry responsibility for which they were too young in their matriculation year have proved their worth again and again. The prefect system is accepted in principle but the practice of it is constantly reviewed and improved. Here again responsibility and service are the watchwords. The opportunity to diverge from the syllabus allows enjoyment, enthusiasm and flexibility. One school attempted a scheme which allowed half a week's work on a single subject to the exclusion of all others, and in the hands of enthusiastic teachers, this achieved amazing results. Syndicates of pupils have done well working collectively. Small numbers, to mention this again, allow maximum time for practical experiment in a laboratory. For career guidance, some schools have weekly lectures by men from outside on the interest and practice of their work, and tours of industry which incorporate observation and discussion of different facets of the labour situation are well established. As rigid patterns of cadet training became obsolete and uninteresting, various private schools introduced map reading, field craft exploration and first aid as well as more military specialities like signalling or gunnery into their parade periods. Instead of cadet camps, arduous exercises over perhaps four days were organised in rough country. Small independent sections responsible for their own catering and welfare provided demanding training in leadership, cooperation, and consideration particularly for the smallest and weakest members of these groups. The opportunity for initiative in many different directions is very attractive to worthwhile staff members.

Extramural programmes

It goes without saying that a small and highly organised school can achieve participation

by all its pupils in a considerable portion of its activities. Instead of having one prestige team in each age group, there can be teams for everybody. If pupils do not qualify for external competition, there are house matches and leagues within the school. In athletics, in addition to the record for the able performer to aim at, there are points for standards which the boy of average ability can attain if he takes trouble. It is often compulsory for all members of a school to remain there for the afternoon so as to be available for extramural activity.

The range of interests offered depends in the last resort on the abilities and interests of staff members. There should be the chance for every pupil to find some interest which he wishes to make his own. Religion, academic work and games have been mentioned. In addition there is a proliferation of hobbies such as printing, pottery, motor maintenance, natural history and exploration, photography and so on. Drama involves carpentry, set-building, and electrical work as well as the acting. Music regularly finds its devotees in the choir, the orchestra, and perhaps light opera. Art is more individual, but a good art teacher is an essential member of a full staff. Social work has been attempted in night schools for Africans, and boys' clubs for the less privileged. A regular feature of school life is the chance of going on tour, whether for games or with a play or a folk group or on an expedition.

The private school has to be on its toes to remain in business. Being in the teaching business, it strives for a vigorous and imaginative interpretation of its task, and finds fulfilment in service. The teacher who looks for immediate recognition is bound to be disappointed; when a past pupil returns with recognition and thanks after leaving a school this is reward enough. Probably none of the ideas set out above is the sole possession of any particular school. The objectives are general, but the private schools aim at their wide range of excellence in human relationships and interests.

Arnolds of the Bushveld

(Continued from page 25)

ties of sensitivity, compassion, and social concern in preference to those of manliness and leadership. Conformity is no longer the obvious quality bred in the English public schoolboy of today, where as in South African schools there are heavy sanctions against non-conformity, and this is true even in that sphere in which Arnold himself asserted the importance of independence of action — the role of headmaster. Caught up in a career structure which puts a high premium of "safeness" and stolidity, South African headmasters as a group show a conservatism, a resistance to innovation and a craven sensitivity to reasonable criticism which would have made Arnold despair.

REFERENCES

1. I have argued this proposition in **Tom Brown in South Africa** (published lecture, Rhodes University (Library), Grahamstown) 1972. pp. 7-13.
2. Honey, **op. cit.** (1972). pp. 10-11. This analysis is developed extensively in chapter III of J. R. de S. Honey, **Tom Brown's Universe**: the development of the Victorian public school. (Millington, London, 1976.)
4. For details see J. R. de S. Honey, "The nature and limits of the Victorian public school community", chapter II of Brian Simon and Ian Bradley (eds.), **The Victorian Public School.** (Gill and Macmillan, Dublin, 1975.)
5. Honey, **op. cit.** (1976), chapter III.
6. Francis Hope, in Miriam Gross (ed.) **The World of George Orwell** (1971), p. 10.
7. This parallel is documented in Honey, **op. cit.** (1976), chapter III.
8. Colin Cross, **The Fall of the British Empire** (Hodder, 1968), chapter I, and Correlli Barnett, **The Collapse of British Power** (Methuen, 1972).
9. Michael Ashley (Rhodes University Department of Education), **The British Influence on Education in South Africa,** Conference paper, Grahamstown Conference on English-speaking South Africa Today, 18 July, 1974.