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Southey, Peter

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Johannesburg College of Education
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Honey Gluckman asked me after the Conference if I'd like to reply to some of the things Michael Gardiner had said about black education and the DET. When I looked doubtful she gave my arm another twist, and the little twistings of my pencil give you this - which you needn't trouble to read if you're quite sure that the DET is all bad.

Michael Gardiner expressed these views, if I understood him properly:

- empty desks in white schools should be used to seat black children;

- the DET intends its products to fill an inferior sector of the employment spectrum;

- the deficiencies in black education have political origins; therefore the solutions will have to be political too;

- the initiative for educational reform lies with black teachers.

The apparent unassailability of some of these views accounts for some of my reluctance to comment on them - it will not help me to be perceived as an apologist for the very things I am working to change. I am more comfortable with more practical issues of teaching English than with political debate.

The DET of the eighties is not the same as its precursor of the sixties or even seventies. Of course it has inherited many of its characteristics just as it has retained many of its personnel, and of course it reflects a political dispensation just as every education department must inevitably do. But it would be very unfair to dismiss the problems, policies and achievements of today's DET because of its history, and it is on that basis that I accepted Mrs Gluckman's suggestion and the framework supplied by Mr Gardiner's views.

Let's begin, then, with the 153 637 empty desks in white schools (SAIRR report just released).

The total enrolment in black schools across the 1986 Christmas holidays grew by 252 000. The political anomaly which would allow white places to be filled by black children would cater for just two thirds of a single year's increase. It would do nothing for the current overcrowding (the topic under discussion when Mr Gardiner made his remark). Alternatively, those white places could reduce average black class size by 3,8 pupils per class if they were used in DET areas, or 1,1, pupils per class over the whole of South Africa (assuming an average class size of 45 pupils).

Once filled, those desks could make no further contribution either to the exploding black school population or to the average class size.

Instead of asking for such an unlikely political concession, the DET in 1986 completed 25 new primary schools and 28 new secondary schools, and added 435 classrooms to 44 existing schools. Building operations at a further 33 new schools are underway, and 110 new schools are in the architectural planning stage. This is only one aspect of the DET's massive building programme; all backlogs are planned to be eliminated within 10 years to give a maximum class size of 40 in primary schools and 35 in secondary schools. No other education department in Africa or anywhere else comes near matching the growth in the provision of education already achieved by the DET, let alone the projected growth.

To return to Mr Gardiner's point: any attempts to solve the problem of the shortfall of desks, classrooms, schools, colleges or teachers in black education by using spares from white education only trivialize the problem.

But for all that, the principle of empty white desks alongside overcrowded black ones

rankles just the same, I imagine. In that respect, then, those working in the DET are fortunate in being able to get on with practical alternatives. Perhaps we do not see ourselves as being responsible for the laws that cause this - only as working for one of the departments that reflect those laws. What should we do about it? Nobody who accepts a salary for employment in any of this country's 'racist education structures' sounds very convincing to me in denouncing them.

I think Mr Gardiner's second point - that black education is directed towards an inferior role in the economy for its products - is being overtaken by events. One of my worries about black education until the recent initiatives in technical education was that its products are unemployable except in perpetuating black education itself. Nearly all black schools have been academic, and the most popular subjects are the three languages, Biology, History and Geography. Less than one third of the 296 056 pupils who began the secondary phase in 1982 wrote the std 10 exam in 1986. Of those 97 000 candidates, 37 000 passed. The top few hundred were given places in universities and colleges. Where are the others with their passes in History and Biology? And the sixty thousand who didn't pass? And the 200 000 who fell out along the way? No - academic education for everyone seems a fruitless way to pursue parity.

Recent developments in the DET'S provision of technical education are too various to detail here.It would be juvenile to dismiss them as a neo-Verwoerdian ploy to perpetuate a non- statutory form of job reservation. Technical, commercial and academic education are all offered: the choice rests with the parents and their children; aptitude is the decisive consideration. I have heard these developments dismissed bitterly with "when the economy needed black labourers Bantu Education made sure they abounded; now it needs black technicians, so the DET will provide them". The tone implies that there is a deliberate policy to exploit black children to their disadvantage. I must confess I haven't caught the

least whiff of it, and the practical implications of effecting such a policy baffle me.

Exactly in whom or where in the nebulous "DET" would this sinister motive reside? If Mr Gardiner thinks it is 'top management', let him spend an hour talking to someone like the DET Deputy Director General, Dr Dirk Meiring, and see if he comes away with his preconceptions intact.

However that may be, how would top management implement their plot? Black education occurs at the interface of 70 000 teachers and 6,3 million children. Intervening between these nearly numberless people interacting daily behind classroom walls and the handful of planners in Pretoria are core syllabuses controlling all education departments plus a choice of textbooks written by over 20 independent publishers. Evil white bogy men in grey suits just don't have access to the process of black education itself.

It is one thing to deplore apartheid as it is manifested in black education (and anywhere else in our society), but it is quite another for Mr Gardiner, in his third point, to blame apartheid for the deficiencies of black education. What then is to blame for the presence of these very same deficiencies - and worse - in, say, the seven African countries described by Hugh Hawes in Curriculum and Reality in African Primary Schools? Also, the major determinant of success at school is the home; second is the environment outside home and the school, and the school itself is the weakest of the three. So it seems more reasonable to account for the shortcomings in black education at large by acknowledging that the majority of the continent's peoples live in the third world - though individuals and groups and increasingly whole urbanised communities have transferred readily to the first or are busy doing so. Yes, apartheid laws have inhibited this transfer - while providing the economic means to promote it.

That, too, avoids the question of principle - I make no quarrel with Mr Gadiner's principles

- and allows one to get on with a more pragmatic interpretation of current shortcomings in black education in DET schools.

The JCE conference focussed on the primary school curriculum. The most serious problem there is that the demands of switching abruptly to English as a medium of instruction in Std 3 cannot be met by 350 hours of English teaching in the preceeding three years. Up to the end of Std 2, teachers work towards giving pupils a working vocabulary of 700 English words: in Std 3 their textbooks smother them with 7 000.

The repercussions of this cannot be overestimated. Baldly put, the vernacular persists as the medium in the classroom; English has a token role in the form of written notes culled verbatim from uncomprehended textbooks; rote learning is the basic cognitive strategy - in Maths and the languages as in the other subjects where it might have more legitimacy; and the Std 10 examination results have no predictive validity in tertiary programmes.

Equally unpolitical solutions suggest themselves, such as dual medium of instruction in the primary phase, with the vernacular being used for enliteration in about 80 percent of the day in Sub A, decreasing by fairly regular intervals to about 20% in Std 4; English would correspondingly increase from about 20 in Sub A to 80% in Std 4 (or Afrikaans, where it is chosen as the medium of instruction). The graduated change-over to English medium would be bolstered by an enriched English course which anticipated the conceptual and lexical demands of new subject content at each next level.

Separating the school day into Vernacular medium studies and English medium studies in this way would address some of the other problems raised during the conference. It would, for example, allow integration of subject content and language skills on the basis of tasks, themes, stories, situations, games and activities, and end 30 minute subject segmentation.

This kind of integration at the level of course materials cross the curriculum would also facilitate in-service retraining of teachers. The comprehensive English/Vernacular materials package would include a highly supportive teacher's guide. If it were thought necessary, subject-specific pupils' workbooks could testify to the inclusion of the syllabus requirements of the various subject disciplines.

A proposal like this is only as good as its chances of implementation. It is worth noting, then, that junior primary curriculum development in the DET is at the point where proposals of this kind are being submitted by a host of sub- committees to a central task group. The DET has sinned by omission along with the best of education departments by not always consulting the people most affected by its planning. This project, however, is rooting its work in the specific needs and expressed wishes of black primary school teachers, principals and advisers themselves. Watch this space.

Mr Gardiner's final point conjured visions of unnumbered ranks of black teachers standing ready to take flame like a dry pine forest in a berg wind.

If he meant that initiatives for reform ought to come from black teachers I would agree. But to the extent that this was a prediction, which is how I understood it, I am more sceptical. Aren't teachers, white and black, as opposed to their representatives difficult to mobilise in any cause? Mr Gardiner may know some teachers who are ardent in their pursuit of a new society, and I am aware of ATASA's initiatives in what The Sunday Times of November 22 calls:"A brave attempt to introduce unity into South Africa's troubled education system", involving representatives of teachers, but the few hundred teachers I have worked with over the past nine years - in schools and colleges, marking public exams and attending conferences - provided different generalizations - more mundane, and more impressive.

One of the more practical political agendas quite a lot of black teachers seem to be following

now puts its faith in the power of money, for example. I thought of them a couple of Saturdays ago when I saw all the white faces at the NEUSA seminar at Wits on "People's Education for People's Power". Staff attendance at many black schools is astonishingly patchy during the season of upgrading examinations at say UNISA and VISTA. So on a Saturday in November it is largely up to whites who feel so inclined to attend workshops on people's education for people's power. The real game is being played somewhere else.

[Readers who would like to pursue the issues raised in this paper, in the meantime, might like to consult "Race against the Ratios" (1987) by Vanessa Gaydon published by the South African Institute for Race Relations. Lengwitch hopes to publish responses to Peter Southey in its next edition. ed.]