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Trends in Policy in African Education, South of the Sahara, 1910-1960

by K. B. HARTSHORNE

I. BRITISH EDUCATION POLICY

AT the time of the First World War nearly all educational effort in British Tropical Africa, as in South Africa, was in the hands of the Christian missions.[1] During the previous seventy years, when almost every other interest in Africa was concerned with the exploitation of the continent and its peoples, the Christian missionaries had been steadily laying the foundations of African education. In this they were pioneers, with the faults of pioneers. They have been charged with the wholesale carry-over of English syllabuses, a too-bookish emphasis, competition among themselves leading to overrapid expansion, encouraging the development of the individual at the expense of community development. Education is a field of human endeavour in which mistakes are inevitable, and it is almost certain that any education agency in the African situation would have made these same initial mistakes. To complete the picture it should be remembered that it was the missionary societies who encouraged the use of African languages in teaching, that we owe to Christian missionaries the first transcriptions of most African languages.

It was the missions themselves who were most aware of the weaknesses in their own educational efforts, that there were needs in Africa far beyond their capacity to meet alone. The formation of the International Missionary Council in the years following on 1918 provided the necessary impetus to action. The first practical move came from the United States where, in 1920, the Phelps-Stokes Commission under the leadership of Dr. Jesse Jones was appointed to enquire into the state of education in West, South and Equatorial Africa. The report of this Commission[2] made no effort to gloss over the weaknesses of missionary work in education, and indeed the missionaries who studied it "were perplexed, bewildered, sometimes angry." It marked the beginning of a new phase in African education, and because of it there was a transformation in thinking and educational practice, not only in the British territories but throughout Southern Africa, including the Belgian and French dependencies. So fruitful and stimulating were the reports of this Commission that recently (January 1960) West African leaders have proposed that "Education in Africa" and other Phelps-Stokes reports should "be abridged and re-published, in a single volume, for the education of a new generation of African teachers."[3]

The relevance of the main findings of "Education in Africa" to the modern situation will be apparent from a brief summary:

> Educational progress and radical changes in aims and methods outside Africa have been ignored.
>
> The curricula and methods in use were designed with reference to European, rather than African, environment and conditions.
>
> There has been too much concentration of effort on the individual pupil, too little attention to the life of the community and the individual's place in it.

The report also stressed the need for governmental participation on an increasing scale, and of cooperation between government, missions and the African people themselves.

During this same period (1918-1925) the British Colonial Office was also developing a growing interest in educational problems. The idea of mandates and the protection and development of dependent peoples led to the welfare aspect of colonial administration receiving serious consideration. In June, 1923, there came into being the "Advisory Committee on Native Education in the British Tropical African Dependencies" representative of both government and missionary interests.

The first report in 1925,[4] a short pamphlet of six printed pages, set down the guiding principles for British African educational policy for the next twenty years. The philosophic assumptions underlying this policy may be summarised as follows:

> Western Civilisation has something to offer to the colonial dependencies; there is something of universal value in our Greek, Roman and Christian heritage.
>
> The essential one-ness of human mentality throughout the world.

There was no intention of imposition from without; "education should be adapted to the mentality, aptitudes, occupations and traditions of the various peoples, conserving as far as possible all sound and healthy elements in the fabric of their social life; adapting them where necessary to changed circumstances and progressive ideas, as an agent of natural growth and evolution."(5)

Any suggestion of undue State pressure is rejected, and the principle of freedom in the moral and intellectual sphere is accepted unreservedly.

Stress is laid in the report on the importance of the individual and his development; that education was to concern itself with independence and self-responsibility, efficiency in the community as man and citizen. The needs of the community itself do not receive the emphasis that is found in the Phelps-Stokes report. Indeed, this aspect receives significant attention only in 1935, when a stronger and firmer enunciation of the 1925 statement was issued by what was now the "Advisory Committee on Education in the Colonies."(6) This contained an interesting change of emphasis from the development of the individual to the "improvement of the total life of the community." Stress is laid not on the formal education of children in school, but on the "co-ordination of the activities of all the agencies aiming at social improvement." Emphasis is given to health, agriculture, environmental studies, adult education and, most important, the part to be played by the African people themselves.

"A slower development in which African ideas and initiative find expression, and experience is gained by responsibility and, if necessary, by mistakes, is to be preferred on a long view to more immediate and spectacular results under more efficient European management."(7)

Implicit in the report, too, is an awareness of the intimate connection between educational policy and economic and social policy, between education and production, education and living conditions — "if the difficult transition from traditional ideas and institutions to forms better adapted to the rapidly changing environment is to take place successfully, conscious and deliberate efforts must be made to guide and assist the evolution."(8)

Together with this aim of raising the whole level of community life, in the years from 1935 to 1945 there was a healthy interest among African educationists in the findings of the social anthropologists, who had begun to distinguish some of the main symptoms of culture change. Two of these symptoms were of particular interest to the educator:

A division of interests and allegiances between old and young.

The development of individualism and the consequent disturbance of the co-operative basis of organised life, and the weakening of social cohesion.

It has long been recognised by educators in Africa that the basic problem lies in imparting *any* kind of education that has not a disintegrating and unsettling effect upon the people. In addition to the tensions between old and young, there are the dangers of a relapse into illiteracy when schooling, as is common throughout Africa, is limited to three or four years. In order to close the gap between young and old, and to integrate the education of the whole community, the idea of "Mass Education" (or Fundamental Education, to use the term adopted later by UNESCO) began to gain prominence in the years following on 1940. The report of this name,(9) issued by the Advisory Committee in 1942, stated the following objectives for educational policy:

The wide extension of schooling for children with the goal of universal school within a measurable time.

The spread of literacy among adults, together with a widespread development of literature.

The planning of mass education of the community as a movement of the community itself, involving the active support of the local community from the start.

The effective co-ordination of welfare plans and mass education plans so that they form a comprehensive and balanced whole.

The people, as a community, should be taught to understand and to appreciate the forces which have changed, and are changing, their lives so radically.

The post-war years brought about a clear formulation of British colonial policy as the attainment of self-government and independence by the territories with which we are here concerned. The main problem of educational policy became to plan and provide a system of education which would produce educated and responsible African leaders, administrators and technicians, and which would "enable the emergent peoples of Africa to take their full place in the modern

world." The Colonial Development and Welfare Act of 1945, by which a sum of £120 million was set aside to "prime the pump" in the colonial areas, brought about in particular a rapid advance in higher education, with the setting up of University Colleges in West Africa, Uganda, Malaya and the West Indies. In educational policy in general, the new emphasis is to be found in the Advisory Committee's report on "Education for Citizenship in Africa." (1948)[10] The terms of reference were:

> "To study the techniques needed to prepare people for responsibility, and examine generally the problem of building up a sense of public responsibility, tolerance and objectivity in discussion and practice, and an appreciation of political institutions, their evolution and progress."[11]

The recommendations concern themselves with conscious preparation for citizenship through the academic and out-of-class activities of the schools, and among adults.

It was very apparent, however, that in Africa as elsewhere there was considerable disparity between stated educational aims and policy, and performance and practice in the schools. Colonial educators were constantly under criticism. The main criticisms continued to be:

> "There was too little education; too few children had a chance of any schooling at all, and of those few too small a proportion carried their schooling to the stage at which it would be really useful to them.
>
> The other criticism was that the education was effective in breaking up the old African life, but not in adapting its pupils to the conditions of the new. It was bookish, divorced from reality, and gave its pupils a distaste for manual work and for rural life."[12]

So widespread was criticism that by 1950, only two years after its previous report, the Advisory Committee was already preparing a re-statement of educational policy. It was realised, however, that this, as with previous statements, would be effective only if it was fully and enthusiastically accepted by the governments and peoples to whom it was addressed. The efficacy of a further ex cathedra statement was seriously doubted. The problem was stated as follows:

> "How to provide educators in Africa, scattered, isolated, overburdened with routine as they were, with an opportunity for re-thinking their problems together;
>
> How to assist them with professional advice which they would respect and welcome;
>
> How to assure the critics of education, both African and European, that their criticisms had been taken fully into account, and that the best thing for them now to do was to apply the remedies proposed."[13]

Out of this, with the help of the Nuffield Foundation and the active co-operation of the Advisory Committee, came the appointment of two study groups, one for West Africa under the chairmanship of Dr. G. B. Jeffery and the other for East and Central Africa under Mr. A. L. Binns. During the latter half of 1951 these two groups investigated, studied and discussed education "on the spot" in Africa. This was followed by a Conference at Cambridge in September 1952, the report on which, "African Education", was as much a landmark as its predecessor "Education in Africa", by the Phelps-Stokes Commission thirty years earlier.

It is impossible to underestimate the impact of this conference and report on educational advance in British Tropical Africa. Education is, as stated by the Chairman of the Conference, "first and foremost a movement — and indeed a spiritual movement". Since the conference this movement has gained considerable momentum. Beyond and above the discussion of the organisation, machinery and "mechanics" of education, and the mass of detailed and specific recommendations that were considered, two basic principles emerge from the report:

> First, a re-affirmation of the spiritual basis of education, not as a pious platitude but as something to be translated into effective action at various educational levels.
>
> Further, a re-statement of the idea which had been gaining steadily in importance since 1925: that the "school should be an integral part of the community and that the teacher should identify himself as closely as possible with the community to which his pupils belong"; that education must lift the whole community and prepare Africans to live well in their own country.
>
> "What we seek in effect is a more liberal education for Africans based on their own African environment and on their own way of life."[14]

The responsibilities of the educator in Africa are immense. Africa "has struck its tents and is on the march"; the speed and intensity of social change in the African community are such that failure to bring the right formative influences to bear upon both children and adults can bring

major disaster. An American writer has summed up the position thus: "The future of Africa depends upon a race between education and chaos."[15] Material advance in education during the next ten years will be dramatic, as can be seen from the educational plans of new nations such as Ghana and Nigeria. It is a task of the first magnitude to send whole nations to school, a task requiring not only vast material resources but also deep spiritual reserves. Europeans concerned with this task must be willing and able to understand African ideas and needs so that they are in a position to help the African community to make the imperative reconciliation between the demands of modern society and the heritage of their own culture and tradition.

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