Bantu Education

Andrew Phillips

St. John Fisher College

Follow this and additional works at: http://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/ur

Part of the African History Commons, Education Commons, and the Race and Ethnicity Commons

How has open access to Fisher Digital Publications benefited you?

Recommended Citation


This document is posted at http://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/ur/vol2/iss1/6 and is brought to you for free and open access by Fisher Digital Publications at St. John Fisher College. For more information, please contact fisherpub@sjfc.edu.
Bantu Education

Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay’s first paragraph.

South Africa has had to deal with issues of racial differences since colonial times. British settlers came into this foreign country and claimed it as their own. Until recently, these settlers were able to treat the black people of South Africa as a subservient and inferior race as a result of the system of apartheid. Many different strategies were needed to keep this imbalanced system in place. One such strategy was employed through education, or a lack thereof. As long as blacks received a lower quality education than whites, they could not hope to become the political or social equals of whites.
Bantu Education
By: Andrew Phillips

South Africa has had to deal with issues of racial differences since colonial times. British settlers came into this foreign country and claimed it as their own. Until recently, these settlers were able to treat the black people of South Africa as a subservient and inferior race as a result of the system of apartheid. Many different strategies were needed to keep this imbalanced system in place. One such strategy was employed through education, or a lack thereof. As long as blacks received a lower quality education than whites, they could not hope to become the political or social equals of whites.

Originally, South African schools that were government authorized and supported were open to all students, regardless of ethnicity. They were populated by whites, free blacks, and even slaves whose masters paid their tuition (Fredrickson). The quality of this education did not vary; no one was given preference based on the color of his or her skin. The schools that the government began to establish in 1822, however, tended to exclude non-white students. This was not an official policy, though. The fees at these schools simply became more than blacks could afford. Most whites could not afford the costs either, so many children were beginning to be deprived of quality schooling (Fredrickson).

To cope with this shortage of affordable education, many mission schools were founded to take in black students. Yet this was not an adequate solution. Most of the students that attended mission schools were Christian. Many parents viewed mission schooling as a recruiting ground for Christianity, and consequently non-Christian students did not take advantage of these opportunities. The rift between religious groups was apparent in village life all over the country, not just in schools. Down Second Avenue by Ezekiel Mphahlele illustrates this rather clearly. The village that he lived in as a child was divided according to religion. The Christians who lived on one side of the river were further subdivided into groups of Methodists, Dutch Reformists, and Presbyterians. On the other side of the river lived the tribal kraal communities. The Christians referred them to as “heathens”, and there was to be no association between the two orders, lest the consequences be suffered (Mphahlele 14).

There were attempts to reform the educational system, but these reforms only benefited white students. The prevailing theory of the government was that whites needed to be educated so that they could serve as employers of labor, while blacks needed only a minimal amount of schooling so that they could perform manual labor. In 1905, the School Board Act, backed by Sir Langham Dale, was passed. It established a new tax to finance the education of poor whites. This served to exclude most blacks from the newly founded system of public education. As a result, most blacks were forced to go to the segregated mission schools. More discrimination effectively resulted as a consequence of this at an even higher level: the job market. Mission schools did not meet the educational requirements needed for apprenticeships, so black students were kept out of jobs that had normally been reserved for them in the past.

The first systematic discrimination came in 1911, when the Cape Supreme Court made the decision to uphold the right of local school boards to exclude blacks from public schools. There were some blacks that managed to get in because they had light skin, but for the most part this marked the start of the many educational disadvantages that would be forced onto black children.

As the century progressed into the 1920s and 1930s, more and more changes began to take place. Up until this time, very few educational resources had been provided. There
was simply not enough funding for schools (Bonner 135). The Berlin Mission Society’s grip on education loosened somewhat, and other missions, Anglican and Catholic among them, came in to establish primary schools. These churches did not require that students be baptized and concentrated more on teaching English than others had in the past (Bonner 135). There were requests to build non-denominational schools, but they were denied. The communities that lacked missions created their own schools, often going to great extremes to educate their children. For example, in one village there was “one teacher who taught us under the mohlopi tree...[He] stayed in the village in a small thatched house which was built for him...he was hired by the community...[and] paid with chicken eggs.” (Bonner 135).

Education continued to change in the 1940s. Tribal schools were established with the money raised within chiefdoms (Bonner 135). However, the desire for education extended beyond these rural areas. Migrant workers in the mines and hostels turned to fellow workers with basic literacy skills for help. This was all done for a small fee or just out of concern for each other. Newspapers were the key in the education of these workers, by acting as both a source for practice and current information (Bonner 135).

The majority of migrants were without any Western schooling, but they increasingly left the countryside for cities where they could obtain a primary education. The urban environment that they entered into also served to supplement their basic grasp of English and vernacular that they had (Bonner 136). All the relocating of migrants and others snowballed into what is now recognized as the great urbanization movement.

While many blacks went to the cities looking for an education, it was not widely available there. Mission schools were not able to reach the majority of students in urban areas, leaving the mass of black youths without a legitimate chance for education. This helped contribute to the uncontrollability of these juveniles (Bonner 394). As a result, crime rates rose to new heights. Many educators and administrators began to fear that a lack of education in such a densely populated area could lead to political mobilization because the government could not regulate the ideas that may be placed in their heads (Bonner 394). If these youths were allowed to think on their own, they would realize how badly the government treated the blacks in South Africa and they could try to do something about it. The last thing that the government wanted was a challenge to their authority by the urban masses.

This led to the government’s institution of a Bantu education policy. The government realized that the urban workforce was not providing enough people with the education necessary for semi-skilled factory jobs (Bonner 394). This policy was initially enacted to deal with the lack of social control over those in urban areas and to cope with the demand for labor. However, the resources used to drive the act into effect were too little and could not meet the demands for education (Bonner 394). This policy also marked the first time that the mission tradition was challenged as the main way to educate black students. Even though the government regulated mission curriculum, there was still some freedom to teach black students about things like their heritage. The new policy left no room for anything of this sort, and meant only to provide enough education so that the semi-skilled labor positions could be filled.

By the late 1940s, the educational system was proving to be incapable of providing instruction for the growing urban population. Mission schools were still supplying an education to the majority of black students in South Africa (Bonner 396). Then the National Party came to power, and in 1951, the blueprint for Bantu education was drawn up, so to speak (Bonner 397). The major problems with the existing educational systems were recognized. The first major problem was the relatively small proportion of black education.
students reached by mission schools. The second biggest problem was that mission schools
did not have the resources to handle their educational tasks. Only teachers’ salaries were
subsidized by the state. All buildings, supplies, administration, etc. had to be provided by
each individual mission. Inflation caused by war contributed to their economic
shortcomings. The amount that tuition could be raised was limited by the economic
capability of the students. Mission schools were forced to accept more students than they
could handle due to the overwhelming demand, exacerbating the economic burden. Even
the few mission schools that were successful, like St. Peter’s, were unable to hide the fact
that they were little more than poor primary schools with high dropout rates (Bonner 398).
The National Party felt that these problems could be addressed with the introduction of
mass schooling for all black students.

Also contributing to the rise of Bantu education was the factories’ demand for semi-
skilled machine operators. Continual industrial growth created many new jobs of this type,
raising demand. The National Party made it well known that they wanted to uproot urban
blacks and spread them out into rural areas. They did realize, however, that this wasn’t
really possible. Instead, they set out to try to gain control of the working class, use its labor
potential, and control the social and political lives of the members of this class (Bonner
398). If the government could accomplish this, it would eliminate any potential threats to
its supremacy from urban blacks.

The Bantu Education Act was officially passed in 1953. It brought all South
African schools under the supervision of the Department of Native Affairs, which phased
out independent missionary schools. A uniform curriculum was imposed that stressed
separate Bantu culture and prepared students for little more than a life of manual labor
(Fredrickson).

Not surprisingly, this legislation met with a great deal of resistance from the blacks
most directly affected by it. The African National Congress (ANC) led one of the more
prominent campaigns against this system. It spearheaded the boycott of schools to protest
the Bantu Education Act. It promised alternative, informal schooling for the students that
participated. Culture Clubs were organized to meet this need, and course materials and
syllabuses were provided by the ANC (Bonner 404). There were, however, limitations to
this effort. The Culture Clubs allowed themselves to be intimidated by the authorities. It
was also very difficult to provide teachers and equipment for the roughly 6,000 students
participating in the boycott. This number, though large, was nothing when one considers
that over one million students were attending school regularly. The biggest flaw, though,
was the fact that the ANC was not really settled as to the purpose of their protest. It could
not decide whether to make it a short-term protest with an alternative education, or a
system of education to be in place until the fall of the Nationalist government (Bonner
405). The government stepped up and squelched the protest by threatening to blacklist
teachers who supported it and by permanently denying an education to children not
enrolled in public schools by April of that academic year (Fredrickson).

While the Bantu Education Act was passed in 1953, the first year that it actually
went into effect was 1955. It has left a legacy of effects on the country. It produced many
immediate, significant results. Between 1955 and 1965, the number of students in South
African schools doubled, rising from one million to two million. The dropout rate dropped
dramatically (Bonner 400). The Bantu Education Act marked the first time that a mass
educational system was established that embraced the majority of working-class youth. It
was also the first time that the state was able to draw the bulk of urban blacks to school and
students actually maintained their attendance for longer periods of time (Bonner 401).

The financial burden of providing an education to blacks was given to black
taxpayers. This allowed the government to incur very low costs itself in its effort to reform
the school system (Bonner 401). Eighty percent of black taxation was allocated to the
schools. This hardly provided sufficient resources for the number of students that were in
school. Less was being spent per student, and budgets for things like school food services
were cut (Bonner 401). As harsh as these methods may seem, they allowed for an
educational system that, for the first time, included most black students.

There was an undeniable link between industry and the new educational system.
The curriculum was developed based on factories’ needs for semi-skilled laborers to work
with the machines that were replacing artisans (Bonner 401). A central aim at the outset of
the Bantu Education Act was to get students through four years of schooling, which was
seen as adequate enough to prepare students for semi-skilled workers. The government
was looking to rapidly expand the workforce, and getting students through school quickly
was the way to accomplish that. J. Dugard, a Regional Director of Bantu Education,
reinforced this when he said, “Our first aim was to promote literacy by making it possible
for as many children as possible to complete the first four years of school.” (Bonner 402).

The Bantu Education Act also had another goal. It set out to create a new authority
which would get blacks to ally under the new educational system. H. F. Verwoerd, the
man in charge of Bantu education, wished to limit how high a black man could climb in the
educational and professional world, but he realized that he could not maintain black
subordination if blacks figured out his intentions (Bonner 402). At the outset, more
students were placed in schools because urban parents needed the schools to educate their
children, as well as to keep them safe. They also felt that a tremendous opportunity was
suddenly being offered (Bonner 405). They had a vision in their heads that anyone could
get an education. The rapid increase in enrollment served to reinforce this idea. Only
those that understood the school system and its educational issues realized that they were
being duped. “It was mainly activists who reacted. Black communities just didn’t know
about (the) differences [between mission and Bantu education].” (Bonner 406). Many
students may have reacted favorably to Bantu education because they were shielded by
their ignorance. Said one teacher at the time, “I think they didn’t know it then, that this
Bantu education was killing them.” (Bonner 406).

It was not long, however, before blacks realized that there was indeed a glass
ceiling and that they were being oppressed. The system stirred strong feelings of resistance
in the black population. Verwoerd did not comprehend that most people knew that they
were being limited, and, as a result, the whole educational system ended up having the
opposite effect it was intended to have.

It is important to realize that Bantu education had an effect on individuals, not
simply on the masses. “Fools” by Njabulo Ndebele illustrates the consequences on blacks
at all levels of the educational system. Zani was one of the aforementioned members of the
black population that understood that the black people were being held down. He came
back from school in Swaziland with the intent to “bring light upon the people” of
Charterstown. His higher education in Swaziland, a very different system than the one in
place in Charterstown, made Zani realize that blacks were being exploited. He intended to
challenge the authority of the educational system and get his people to respond in kind. His
first, and best, attempt at doing so was met with considerable resistance from authorities.
He plastered the town with flyers pointing out that celebrating the Day of the Covenant was
celebrating a day of the slaughter of blacks (Ndebele 216). All his signs were immediately
removed from the school and the town so as not to attract attention. When Zani took it one
step further, and came to a crowd of people with a large placard encouraging protest, the
police, who quickly attacked him, tearing up his sign and beating him (Ndebele 224).
Zamani was a teacher employed by the Bantu education system. Initially, he had a strong belief in what it taught. However, as he grew older, he became disenchanted with it. He had little regard for maintaining a proper student-teacher relationship, evidenced by his fathering of Mimi’s child (Ndebele 195). He used to be a strict disciplinarian, but, as time went on, he became more passive and no longer whipped his class for small offenses, such as throwing spitwads across the room (Ndebele 210). Two things best exhibit his lack of belief in the curriculum. First, he allows and encourages his students to learn about their heritage. He allows them to do things like recite Zulu poems. Second, he allows Zani to come into his classroom and speak to his class about the Day of the Covenant (Ndebele 214). Zamani felt that any education that he could deliver in the classroom would not match the one that his students could get in the “real world.” (Ndebele 220).

The principal demonstrates quite clearly the role that he plays in this system. He believes deeply in what he rules. He steps up to any challenge that Zamani or any other teacher may introduce, such as Zani speaking in class (Ndebele 217). He is one big walking contradiction. He likes to fancy himself as the highest authority, yet he is a black man enforcing the curriculum of the white man, and he has a portrait of Verwoerd hanging in his office. He is there to implement policy, nothing more, making him a shell of what he thinks he is. He is ruled by whites. At the picnic, he is originally the person in charge, yet he is quickly reduced to a submissive coward when he accidentally hits a Boer’s car with a stone (Ndebele 272). He even goes so far as to call the Boer commoner “my great king.” (Ndebele 273). The principal is much less of a man than he accepts, and the Bantu education system has forced that upon him.

The impact of Bantu education extended well into the Crisis of the 1980s. Athol Fugard wrote about this in his play, My Children! My Africa! He told of mobs and violence that were central to the protests of apartheid. Part of this play centers around Mr. M’s contribution to the oppression. Schools, and consequently Bantu education, were boycotted as part of the protest. Because Mr. M remained at school, he was perceived as against the Cause, even though he was merely trying to summon students to their desks to stop the violence (Fugard 66). Mr. M was ruthlessly murdered by a mob because he was trying to contribute to a peaceful end. Education was a central point in the conflict, and he realized that. However, he felt that there could be less violent ways to protest apartheid and that education was necessary for that. His greatest ambition in life was to facilitate that education, to be the best teacher that he could be (Fugard 67). However, Bantu education was a tool for apartheid, so despite how good a job he did, he could not be accepted as a good teacher, but only a loyal government servant.

Despite the flaws with the Bantu education system, there were ways in which it was very successful. It was obvious that the system was racist, that it didn’t view blacks and whites as equals. However, it was the first scheme to introduce mass schooling to South Africa successfully. To a certain degree, it was used as a model for mass schooling systems in other industrializing nations (Bonner 401). It also served its purpose, at least until recently, as it denied blacks the education that they needed to substantially challenge the apartheid system that it supplemented.
Works Cited


