

Our debt to DET?



Verna Brown

Our reality is what we perceive. What, therefore, does a black child perceive of his education that prompts him to turn his back on a current reality in the hope of its immediate improvement?

He is confronted with overcrowded schools, inadequately trained teachers and the dismal litany of matriculation failures and falling standards. The 1984 results can hardly be counted a cheering prospect. It's all a far cry from those inspiring words of the preface to the de Lange Commission report:

'The provision of education should be aimed simultaneously at the achievement of man's highest ideals and at meeting the needs of his time.' Whether it is possible, Janus-like, to reconcile these two thrusts is debatable, but there's no gainsaying the power of the rhetoric.

In May of this year, horrified by the Atteridgeville educational impasse, the Pretoria branch of the Black Sash submitted a memorandum to the then Minister of Education and Training, Mr Barend du Plessis. As an overview of pupil, teacher and parental attitudes it stated:

'It would be accurate to say that most pupils are bitterly unhappy with Bantu education. They feel cheated by its inadequacy and inferiority. They argue that so much more money is designated for white than for black education that the very fabric of their education system is suspect. At the funeral of Emmah Sathège, a spokesman for COSAS said, "It will always be in our minds that Emmah was killed by a bad education given to the majority of the people in this country."

Traditionally the black child, respectful of his parents who wished to promote his success in life through the attainment of a sound education, was docile and hardworking in pursuit of this goal. As the credibility of Bantu Education has been eroded, a wedge has been driven between parental aspirations and pupil resistance. In fact, a yawning generation gap has developed, fuelled by conflicting attitudes to education. Parents deplore the boycott, foreseeing the ruin of their children's chances of status in the community and a secure livelihood. They accuse their children of either laziness or cowardice in allowing themselves to be intimidated by agitators.

Pupils feel that they have justifiable grievances which their parents wilfully misunderstand. They often regard their parents as sell-outs, having accomplished nothing in black improvement. Their opinions, therefore, are discounted as valueless.'

The memorandum concluded by saying that the problem is deep-rooted, not admitting of easy solution. Even the capitulation of DET to meet the demands of the students

Lesson in black attitudes — a characteristically defiant funeral. Six year old Thaba Sikeco of Wattville was killed.



has not ensured their continued attendance at school. A lasting solution will not be found until black pupils believe that their educational system is fully on a par with that of the whites and is adequate to their needs. Otherwise they will continue to feel 'that education provided by the oppressors to the oppressed will better serve the needs and aspirations of the oppressor than the oppressed. Its aim should be to create self-reliance in the people. To stimulate reasoning instead of resorting to imitation. To fight ignorance and illiteracy.' (Quoted from the Eye, Volume 4, March 1984, p 3)

The memorandum urged that the major recommendations of the well considered de Lange Commission Report be implemented as a matter of urgency and that TV, a powerful educational tool, be extensively used to upgrade black education as soon as possible.

In July, our chairman, Mrs Anneke van Gylswyk received this civilized response from the Minister.

'Thank you very much for your letter of 9 May 1984 and for the interest that you share with me in a matter that is of critical importance to the future of South Africa and that obviously should be treated with the honesty, realism and responsibility it deserves.

I had started, in all sincerity, to reply to your memorandum but soon realized that our respective perspectives of the matter were so widely different that no useful purpose would be served in my trying to react to each one of the points raised in the memorandum. Since we do have in common a sincere concern about as complex and important a matter of education, I should like to invite you as a first step, to pay a visit to our Head Office with the sole purpose of being informed factually and correctly in regard to the extent, policy, problems and progress of Education for Blacks.

Following this exercise, a further discussion with the

* DET: Department of Education and Training



photo: Gill De Vlieg

Minister of Education and Training can serve a useful purpose.

Before considering any other possible course of action. I shall await your response.

Yours faithfully

B J du Plessis, MP

Minister of Education and Training.'

In November Anneke van Gylswyk, Margie Laurence and I were cordially received by the Public Relations Officer for DET, Mr Job Schoeman, for our briefing. In all we spent two and a half hours in his office, being exposed to a sophisticated DET version of 'show and tell.'

The 'show' comprised a glossy film, emphasising DET's considerable achievement in expanding the scope of black education. Shiny faces, scintillating teachers, sophisticated equipment and soulful singing added up to an object lesson in 'Happiness is'. We remarked (though it seemed somewhat rude to do so in the wake of the movie's euphoria) that if that were a realistic portrayal of black education, the boycotts would not be in progress.

The 'tell' involved Mr Schoeman's expounding knowledgeably on a number of carefully mounted slides which stressed the following:

- In 1973, 3,3 million black pupils were enrolled at school. Ten years later the enrolment was 5,6 million. He explained, and we took his point, that the black population explosion is the single most difficult problem with which the Department has to contend. Mr Schoeman said that the department could hope to come to terms with existing numbers but that simply keeping pace with the black growth rate was a Herculean task without the accompanying necessity of a major programme of improvement.
- To accommodate ever spiralling numbers DET's budget had increased from R143,8 million in 1978/9

to R709,25 million for 1984/5. The total revenue from black taxation is not sufficient for the Department of Education and Training's budget.

- DET admits that the quality of education for blacks is not the same as for whites as this is essentially determined by what happens in the classroom. Even if massive funding were immediately forthcoming, the problem of unqualified and underqualified teachers would not be solved overnight. Its solution is to be found in steady, patient application to upgrading over a long period of time. The qualifications of black staff are an eye opener. In 'RSA' in 1983 3,6% of black staff have matric plus a degree, 23,5% have matric plus 2 years, 52,5% are without matric and 20,4% are unqualified (i.e. having no teacher training whatsoever). Since 80% of DET's budget is expended on teachers' salaries and the majority of the teaching force is under 30 years of age, it is easily seen that salary commitments are not as heavy as in white education where teachers are much better qualified. (We were quick to point out that the shortfall could easily be spent in other areas.)

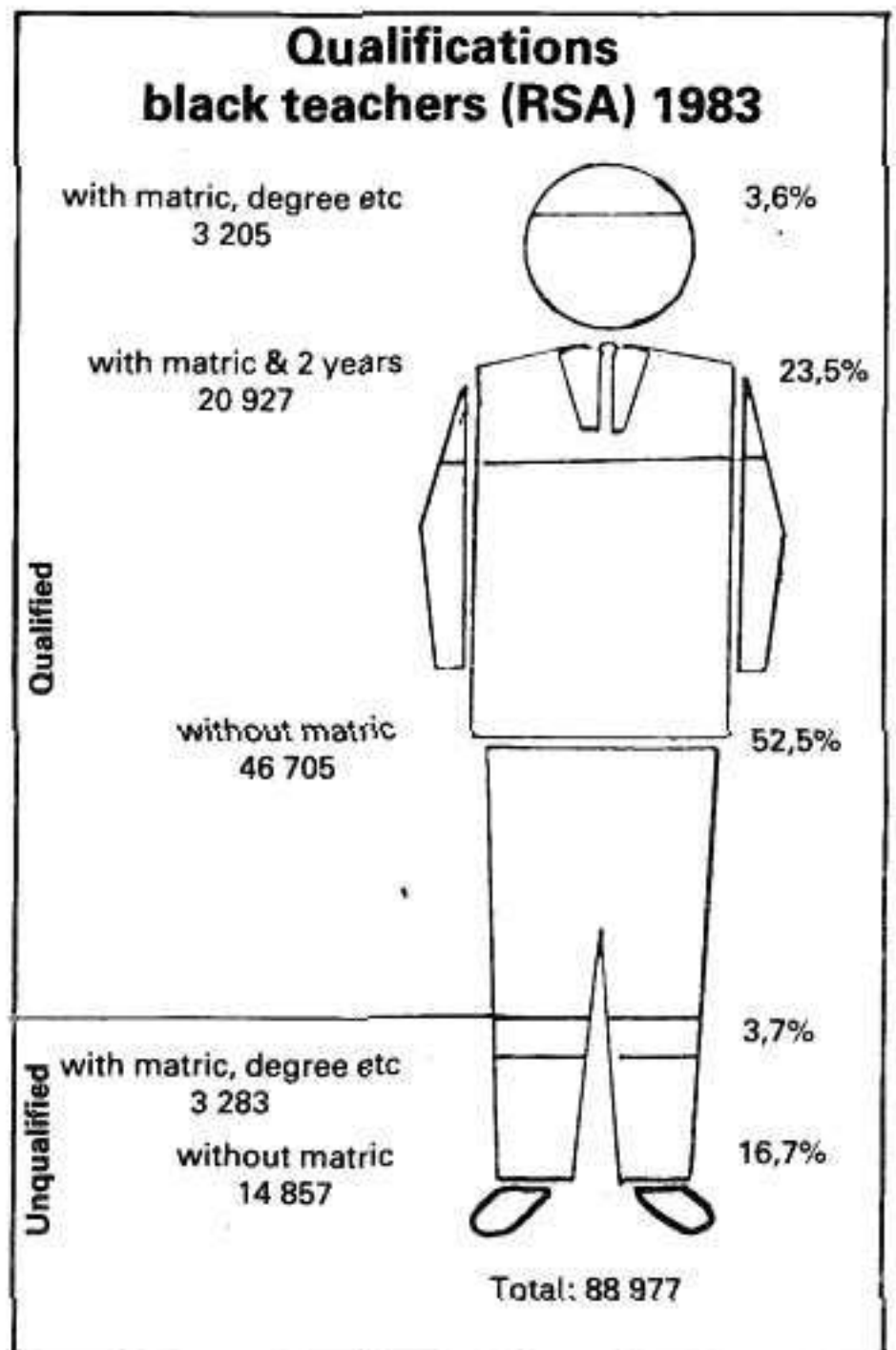
Mr Schoeman made the interesting point that DET had been criticised by Malawian educational officials who said that if education were more elitist, available resources being devoted to the gifted and able, quality teachers would be forthcoming within a much shorter time span.

- We raised the subject of the unsatisfactory teacher-pupil ratio and were told that the Department aimed to reduce this to 1:40 (primary) and 1:35 (secondary) by 1986. A total of R107 million was spent on school buildings during the 1982/3 financial year, 12 new classrooms being built during every working day.
- Anneke van Gylswyk asked specifically about unrest at the Mabopane Technikon. She was told that as it operated as an autonomous body it was not DET's concern.

- To sum up Mr Job Schoeman's point of view I quote from the SA Foundation News, June 1984 in which he said, 'No one, least of all the departments responsible for black education, would deny that shortcomings, handicaps and disparity in several spheres exist between the various departments of education. Simple comparisons between, for instance, white education and black education are totally unrealistic if the evolution of the different departments, the levels of development of the population groups and the extremely important demographic, socio-economic and socio-cultural differences are not taken into account . . . In a situation where a department of education has to cope with Third World growth rates and socio-economic conditions on the one hand, and on the other with First World expectations and a highly sophisticated economy within which its products must compete, frustrations develop that may serve as a hot-bed for boycotts and political incitement, as has happened in Atteridgeville . . . The unscrupulous exploitation of black education and the black pupil as a "soft target" can only serve to promote stagnation and is to the detriment of the pupil.' He deplores the rôle of the English Press in fanning the flames of pupil unrest and never giving DET any credit for its efforts.

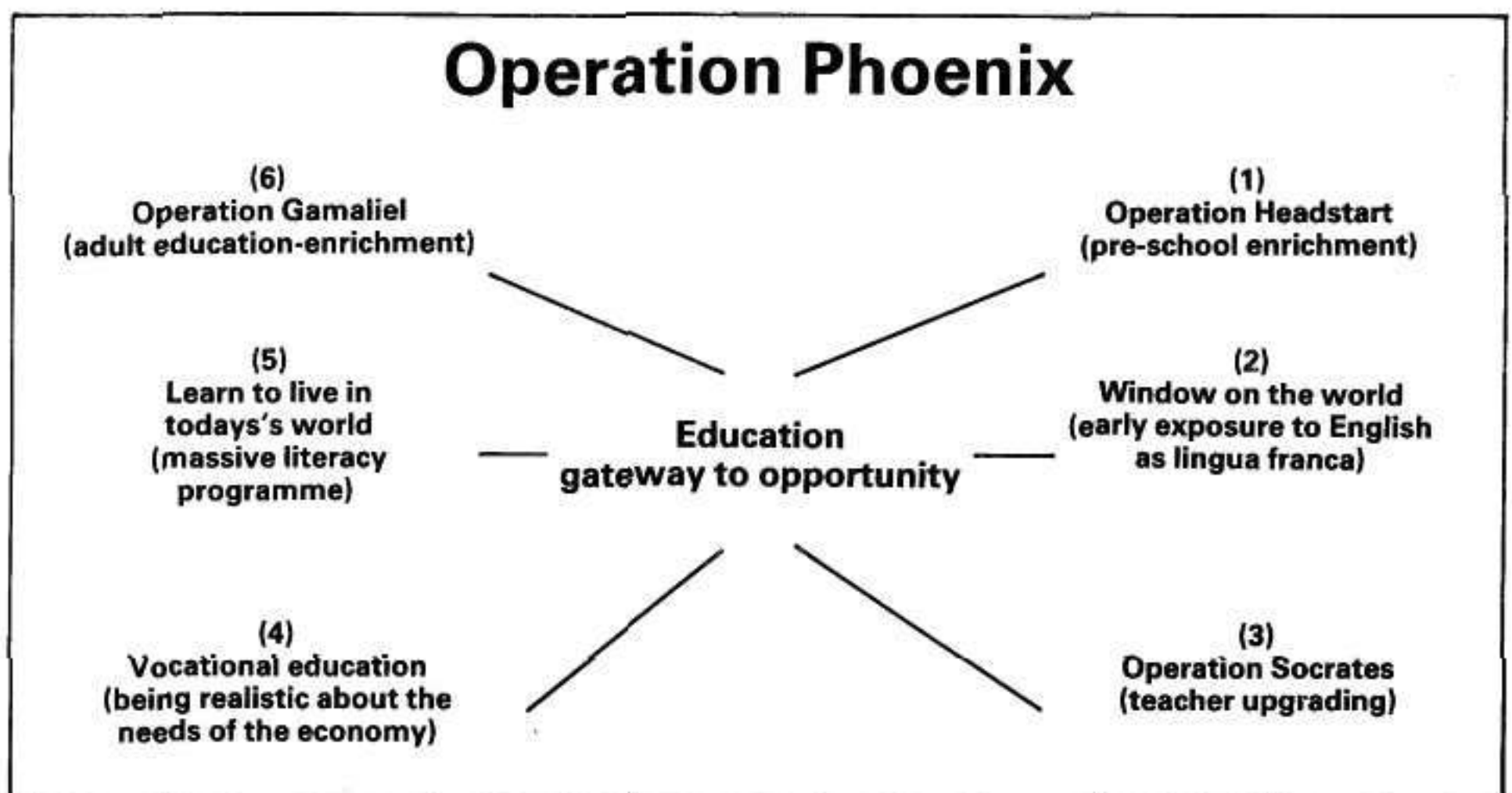
The black pupil, however, continues to make the 'simple comparison' that Mr Schoeman deplores. He sees the superior white school buildings, the high pass rate of white matriculants, the distinction-gloat fanfare. He perceives the glittering opportunities afforded those who emerge from the system. Like most adolescents he is absolute. He does not make allowances. He declares his education inferior. Comparisons in this case are not odious; they are inevitable.

There is no gainsaying the fact that educationally, DET has made strides in addressing itself to the massive shortfall. When we presented Mr Schoeman with the following plan to upgrade black education, we found that in every single area either considerable advances are in



progress or an impressive start has been made.

Life in South Africa cannot remain compartmentalised. By its nature our 'very strange society' gives everything a political edge. In education the political edge is being honed to a cutting tool, sharpened by the South



African political malaise that separation invites inequality and breeds suspicion. In response to this the de Lange Commission pleaded for ONE education system headed by an umbrella body responsible for all aspects of education. Dr Gerrit Viljoen said on the TV programme Mid-week (November 21) that such an umbrella body existed in the National Education Department, which was responsible for the areas of Policy, Funding and Certification of Examinations, but that differentiated education would continue to be appropriate to the social, political and educational matrix of the South African reality.

Part of this South African reality is the passionately held belief among blacks that differentiation inevitably spells inequality. *If Black education were miraculously transformed overnight into a scholastic utopia, provided it were separate, it would be perceived to be discriminatory.*

Cosmetic change, image building and even sound educational reform will not effect a resurgence of faith in a system perceived to be socially and politically non-viable. What is needed is a dramatic commitment to the elusive goal of true educational equality and a groundswell of goodwill to carry it.

The structure being what it is, every social group in South Africa is, in one way or another, a minority group. Blacks, numerically in the majority, are given artificial minority status by law.

Jean Marquard: from the introduction to 'A Century of South African Short Stories' p 17, National Book Printers, Goodwood, Cape



photo: Gill De Vlieg

Students at the funeral of four Daveyton pupils

Population growth: 1921 - 2000

