

Letters from Abroad

Gertrude Hankamp Fitzwater
Column Editor

Gertrude Hankamp Fitzwater continues to take an active interest in ASCD. Editing this monthly department of articles from foreign educators is one of her contributions to our Association's work.

South Africans Study Their Schools

TO THE comparatively few Americans who know South Africa, it is a delightful country, indeed. To most of us, however, it is merely a name and a color on the map. Our reaction to mention of this distant country might well be similar to that which the author of this article, Norah Henshilwood, received from a fellow passenger on an eastern seaboard train in the spring of 1948. When Miss Henshilwood reported that she was from South Africa, there came the reply: "Oh, then you're a missionary."

Miss Henshilwood, principal of the Cape Town Training College, is well acquainted with education in South Africa. Extensive travel in Europe as well as in the United States has also given her a knowledge and understanding of educational problems in countries other than her own.—*GHF.*

EDUCATION in South Africa is at the crossroads. Which path we shall follow will depend upon the outcome of several propositions at present under consideration.

Like all countries, we have suffered the evils resulting from two world wars fought within a lifetime. Our schemes for better schools, adequate classroom space, and smaller classes frequently cannot be realized because of a lack of funds. The shortage of teachers, especially of men, is still acute, although there has been an improvement in salary scales. Despite all the valiant efforts

which have been made, the need for new schools, and consequently more teachers, has far exceeded the supply.

Special Problems Encountered

In addition to these things which we suffer in common with other countries, we have our own special difficulties. One of these is the problem of the language medium of the schools. The Government has decreed that Afrikaans- and English-speaking children must be educated through the medium of the mother-tongue in the Primary School. This is a simple matter where the population is of sufficient size to allow two separate schools. Very often, however, the same school must provide the two media, English and Afrikaans, which necessitates either having parallel classes (sometimes under "farm school" conditions with several small classes taught in the same room), or having all the subjects taught through each medium on alternate days.

Our system of education is further complicated by the fact that all Primary and Secondary education was placed by the Act of Union in 1910 under the Provincial authorities, whereas Higher Education, as well as Vocational and Technical education, is directly under the Union Government. This has led to some overlapping, since the Union Department of Education, by the creation of Technical High Schools, has tended to encroach more and more on the Provincial Government preserves.

Quite recently the Union Government instituted a Commission to investigate Technical and Vocational education. Maintaining that they found it necessary to exceed their terms of reference, the Commission made some far-reaching suggestions with regard to pre-University education. To understand what these are, it is essential to have a broad idea of the educational system in its present form.

The average child comes to school at five-plus or six years old, spends two years in the Infant school, then passes through six "standards" of one year each. This brings him to the end of the Primary School stage. The High School period lasts for four years, at the end of which a pupil usually takes the Senior Certificate examination of the Department of Education of his particular province. Matriculation exemption (University entrance) may be obtained by fulfilling certain conditions in this examination.

Recommendations for Change

The "De Villiers Report," as the findings of the Commission are called, stresses the need for the state to undertake compulsory "preschool" or Nursery Education. At present this work with the pre-school child does not receive state aid, and is far from general. The Commission visualizes the end of the Primary School at Standard 5, with a "Junior High School" to follow. This Junior High would cover the years twelve-plus to fifteen-plus and would offer a much wider grouping of subjects than is at present available in the ordinary High School. The Junior High is to be followed by a three-year course in the Senior High School.

The report stresses the need for a longer period at the Training College for Primary teachers (three years in-

stead of the present two), and suggests a closer union with the Universities which already train the High School teachers.

Teacher Reactions Count

The De Villiers Report is now being subjected to the closest examination by the English and the Afrikaans Teachers' Associations, by the Inspectorate, and by others interested in education. There has been some accord and a great deal of disagreement. The latter has been by no means undesirable, since it has given the educational world food for thought and has encouraged teachers to study the best way to put their house in order.

At this stage it is impossible to say how much of the Report will be implemented. In all likelihood the Teachers' Associations, whose comments will be considered seriously by the authorities, will support under certain conditions the plea for Nursery Schools, since the need for them has long been recognised. These associations are likely to oppose much of the Junior High School idea if it means separate schools and the consequent break with tradition of schools already established and doing excellent work. They may ask for a few experimental schools to try out the plan before it is generally adopted. Everyone is likely to agree to the proposal for three years' training for a Primary teacher.

The Report reveals a close study of overseas conditions by the Commission members. Whether their findings are adopted or not, their publication reveals one thing—South Africa is determined to keep abreast of developments in other countries, while at the same time maintaining its own traditions and institutions.

—*Norah Henshilwood.*

Copyright © 1950 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.