

MISSIONARIES AND MISSION SCHOOLS: EXPERIENCES OF CHILDREN (FORMER LEARNERS)

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Abstract

The introduction of formal schooling and learning was a new experience among children of indigenous people in South Africa. This came through missionaries as they introduced mission schools. Missionaries introduced mission schools in South Africa for a multiplicity of reasons such as converting blacks to Christianity, change of morality and standards of behaviour. Some of these reasons were covert (hidden) while others were overt (open). However, another perspective is that mission schools were, among other things, meant to indoctrinate indigenous people by, for example, using the scripture and civilisation. This article wishes to extrapolate the facts with regard to the above notion by reporting on the experiences of former learners (who were children then) of mission schools. They were identified and requested to participate in the research. Specific criteria were developed and used to obtain information from the respondents (former learners of mission schools). From the findings of the former learners, it emerged that mission schools attempted to indoctrinate learners through their aims and objectives. They also aimed to turn learners into conformists. A conclusion was drawn from this article.

1 INTRODUCTION

This article wishes highlight the experiences of children (former learners) of mission schools. In order to do that, some key terms, namely, *mission, missionaries, mission schools, former learners* (children) and schools will be defined for purposes of this article. That will be followed by the aims and objectives of mission schools. Some identified activities of mission schools will also be discussed. That will be followed by experiences of identified former learners of mission schools. Conclusions will be drawn from the discussions.

2 DEFINITION OF TERMS

Although the cited key terms, namely, children, mission, missionaries, mission schools, former learners, students and schools may be defined differently in various sources, they will be defined, for purposes of this article, as noted hereunder. 'Children', in this article refers to minors who are still under the care of adults (Hawkins 1982). They cannot take any independent decisions which may be either legal or not.

'A mission' in this context, refers to an organisation which spreads Christian faith, holds a series of religious services, etcetera. Missionaries, according to Hawkins (1982:398), are people who are sent to spread the Christian gospel in a community. Mission schools are those institutions of learning at which Christian faith, religious services, etcetera are spread. 'Former learners' refers to graduates and or drop-outs of an institution of learning such as a formal school. A 'formal school' also refers to a mission school. 'Students' refers to school learners. 'Schools', in this article, refers to formal pre-college and pre-university formal institutions of learning in which teaching takes place according to an agreed formal curriculum, syllabi, etcetera (my own opinion). The terms *children, learners* and *students* will be used interchangeably and also regarded as referring to the same thing in this article.

3 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF MISSION SCHOOLS

Different aims and objectives of mission schools have been cited by various people from contrasting points of view (Du Plessis 1911; Loram 1927; Majeke 1952; Jones 1970; Watson 1982; Cross 1985; Nwandula 1987; Ramagaga 1988). What follows is a discussion of some of the aims and objectives of mission schools. It is important to note that the aims and objectives were not separated in the sources from which they come – probably due to the little or no difference between them. It is for that reason that the aims and objectives will be discussed in that way in this article.

There seem to be two basic subjective schools of thought with regard to the aims and objectives of mission schools in South Africa. These are elaborated on in the paragraphs below.

According to Nwandula (1987:2), a dominant trend in the writing on mission schools in South Africa viewed the development of missionary education as having been evolutionary and as having taken place peacefully. As a result, many missionaries were hailed as having brought the blessings of Christianity and civilisation to Africans (Nwandula 1987:2). For example, one of the aims of the mission schools was in the respective views of Du Plessis (1911), Loram (1927) and Jones (1970) to use education to ‘Christinise and civilize the heathen’. The ‘heathen’ referred to were indigenous Africans of non-European descent. They were also regarded as uncivilised by missionaries who judged them on their subjective norms and values as well as on their other belief systems and behaviors.

To the contrary there is the opinion of Majeke (1952) who, from an economic and political point of view, maintains that missionary education - which was provided in mission schools - aimed at supplementing the state’s legislation such as the then Constitution of South Africa and the 1950 Group Areas Act to ensure the continuance of white dominance in South Africa. Freire (1973) and Aronowitz and Giroux (1985) also respectively interpret the above notion as a strategy which is often used by any dominant party in any

state to perpetuate the reproduction of labour. This notion is endorsed by Majeke (1952) with the following example that, in the second half of the 19th century, the Cape governor at the time, Sir George Grey, subsidised missionary institutions of learning so that they might provide industrial training and elementary education for fitting the 'Bantu' youths into the new economy as labourers. In Marxist terms, this exacerbates the reproduction of class (Aronowitz & Giroux 1985).

In an unsigned article entitled 'The historical roots of Bantu education' (1984), a position was developed that one of the aims of missionary education was to use mission schools to covertly and overtly incorporate the indigenous people of South Africa into the means of production and exchange relations of the colonists. Freire (1973) and Aronowitz and Giroux (1985) also respectively interpret this notion as yet another strategy for reproducing labourers and further ensuring that Africans do not become critical in their thinking and thus be emancipated from being the means of the production processes. Colonists preached morality and industrial labour to the indigenous African people. At the same time, they created a new area of 'need' among the Africans. That is, the latter had to depend on the former for their needs. This meant that learners were not taught, let alone encouraged, to be critical thinkers, that is, to think on their own and be creative and original. They were taught to remain committed and honest servants of their employers when they entered the labour market as adults.

The following example endorses the cited assertion. In 1916, the St Theresa Catholic Mission School (also referred to as Bantule Mission School) was the first Holy Cross mission school to be established in Bantule, Pretoria, in what was then the Transvaal province. One of its aims and objectives was to train coloureds and natives (the term used then to refer to black Africans) in industrial and domestic work (Ramagaga 1988:14).

According to Watson (1982) one of the main aims of missionary education and mission schools was proselytisation - the conversion of indigenous people to Christianity - and emphasis on the standards of behaviors and characteristics of morality of Christian Europe.

Concurring with Watson's proselytisation are other opinions such as those of McDounagh, Kay and Gouws about the aims and objectives of mission schools, namely, that "there is a theological argument or presupposition underlying the whole missionary activity". However, not much is said beyond that assertion.

Then there were other views (Cock, Etherington and Majeke) about the aims and objectives of mission schools. These maintained that missionaries who facilitated mission schooling were themselves agents of an oppressive exploitative foreign presence (Ramagaga 1988:63).

In Ramagaga's view (1988:68), it seems as if mission schools and their agents such as nuns were covertly or overtly perpetuating the status quo by complying with the education strategies of the dominant group: "... that the Natives must be educated not to compete with the European but to play the subordinated and subservient role reserved for them in the established social order".

Compliance, subordination as well as subservience to the dominant group were further endorsed in a fashionable notion of teaching "Africans the disciplines of manual labour and as servants and workers-to-be." Africans were expected to accept the 'naturalness' of their place of 'inferiority' and to be equipped with an appropriate servile mentality (Nwandula 1987:51).

Ramagaga (1988:74) noted that a further event aimed at inculcating subservience to the master, was that of 12th May 1937 when King George VI was crowned. Learners at Holy Cross in Alexandra Township, Johannesburg were grouped around the 'Union Jack' and the school band played 'God save the king'. That procedure was followed by a procession through the streets of Alexandra Township, Johannesburg. Thereafter, the Johannesburg municipality rewarded the school with a "coronation gift of forty seven pounds and five shillings". That, according to Cross (1985) as cited in Ramagaga, was not only an act of cultural imperialism but also a brainwashing process which proclaimed the inferiority of African culture and values and further perpetuated the myth of white superiority.

Much as the Holy Cross Sisters seemed to be conformists in the light of the preceding discussions, they, in some cases, defied the authority of the time. For example, political changes such as the 1950 Group Areas Act and the Bantu Education Act 47 of 1954 prompted the establishment of the Holy Cross Convent School as well as the De la Salle College in Victory Park, Johannesburg in 1954. One of the aims of the nuns was to establish this school to “effect reconciliation between the more affluent and the poor and the oppressed ... to lead youth to Christ, and to work for justice and reconciliation” (Ramagaga 1988:74).

Having discussed the identified aims and objectives of mission schools, I proceed to cite and discuss some identified activities of these mission schools as noted in various sources.

4 IDENTIFIED ACTIVITIES OF MISSION SCHOOLS

A number of sources indicate that there were different activities taking place in the various mission schools in South Africa (Majeke 1952; Nwandula 1987; Ramagaga 1988). These will be touched upon although greater emphasis will be placed on the activities which directly involved learners in the mission schools. The following is a description of some identified activities at mission schools.

Post-standard-six boys were trained in carpentry and girls in housecraft and needlework as early as 1912 at St Paul’s Mission School in Taung (Ramagaga 1988:13). Ramagaga (1988:14) further asserts that, in 1916, the St Theresa Holy Cross Mission School which was founded at Bantule Township, Pretoria, was established to train coloured and native children in industrial and domestic work.

During the dreaded 1918 Spanish flu epidemic (also referred to as ‘drie dag’ by some black Africans), the Holy Cross Sisters started an outreach program at the St Theresa Holy Cross Mission School (Ramagaga 1988:15). It included the opening of a dispensary, home visits for the sick, ill and depressed. Unfortunately, in 1958 St

Theresa Mission School had to be closed when “the municipality of Pretoria ‘killed’ the Bantule mission ...” and residents were relocated to other areas (Ramagaga 1988:15).

The Holy Cross Sisters established Little Flower mission school at Lady Selbourne, Pretoria in 1927 (Ramagaga 1988:16). The secondary section of that school provided domestic science, home nursing, child care as well as general education for the female learners (Ramagaga 1988:16). Boys were in turn taught gardening, handicraft and woodwork (1988:16). This school was relocated to Atteridgeville and was subsequently closed.

At Little Flower Mission School, Lady Selbourne, the nuns also opened a creche “... to care for the small pre-school children whose mothers were working to augment their husband’s wages” (Ramagaga 1988:16). In 1938 a secondary school section of Little Flower Mission School was established Ramagaga (1988:16). It had an industrial section with four classrooms set aside as workshops.

Like Bantule Mission School, Little Flower Mission School’s Sisters started an outreach programme. A medical care centre was started in a former classroom. In that classroom was a wooden box which served as a first-aid kit. It contained, among other things, castor oil, peppermint essence, a jar of vaseline and clean linen strips which served as bandages. The school also had a bicycle which was used as a means of transport for visiting the sick at home. A cottage of the mission was turned into a clinic. Many poor people attended the clinic. The latter also catered for some maternity cases in Lady Selbourne (1988:17).

The St Gerard’s mission school which was established at the Garsfontein mission, Pretoria in 1927 offered Afrikaans, English, SeSotho, IsiZulu and practical work programs such as cooking, sewing, weaving, gardening and elementary cobbling. Mielie (maize) farming was also one of the activities which took place at St Gerard’s mission school. Learners were encouraged to participate in the harvesting process. A savings bank was also introduced to help empower learners to be in a position to save money. Unfortunately St Gerard’s mission school was finally closed because of the enforcement of the Groups Areas Act of 1950 and the introduction of

the Bantu Education Act of 1953. The former act restricted African children from residing and or schooling in areas which were exclusively identified by the then government for white residents. The latter act was tailored to facilitate the education of the African children which was different and separate from that of coloureds, Indians and whites.

In the light of the cited activities, mission schools perpetuated the status quo. That is, there was no effort on the part of mission schools to be emancipated from the status quo by preparing learners to compete equally with the dominant group (Freire 1973; Aronowitz & Giroux 1985). At the same time, teachers as transformative intellectuals in mission schools can, in any democratic society, arise from and work with learners to advance emancipatory traditions and cultures within and outside schools (Freire 1985). However, the aims and objectives as well as the activities of the mission schools facilitated the asking of questions aimed at acquiring information which, in this article, is referred to as 'experiences', from the identified former learners of mission schools. What follows is a report of the experiences of the former learners of mission schools.

5 REPORTED EXPERIENCES OF FORMER LEARNERS

A number of former learners of mission schools were identified and requested to participate by providing information on their experiences in those schools. They are all retired in that they are over sixty years of age. They were learners at different institutions of a learning such as Diocesan, an Anglican missionary school, Grass Dieu, in the Pietersburg (Polokwane) area in the former northern Transvaal (currently Limpopo province), Bethel, a Lutheran church mission school in Bodenstein (currently North-West province), Healdtown's Methodist mission school in the Eastern Cape, St Michaels Anglican primary school, Alexandra and Holy Cross Catholic missionary school, Alexandra, Johannesburg. All the respondents said they were professionals. They included former and current actors in movies and drama, retired vehicle drivers, educators or teachers including school

inspectors, nursing sisters, police officers and ministers of religion (priests).

The respondents were required to provide information on what they understood as the aims and objectives of mission schools. They were further requested to identify as many other activities and or phenomena as they could remember which took place at their former schools. Lastly, the respondents were requested to provide information on their experiences as former learners in mission schools.

Although the respondents were interviewed at different times which suited them, they shared a number of experiences in some cases and their experiences differed in other cases. Some respondents were quoted verbatim to facilitate better understanding of the views they expressed. What follows is a report of the experiences of the identified former learners of mission schools.

5.1 The aims and objectives of mission schools

The aims of the mission schools were to facilitate co-operation between boys and girls as school children in preparation of their roles as adult citizens. They taught learners “the finer parts of life so they could stand upright as adults”. High moral values and leadership were inculcated in those schools so that learners could be exemplary. They were taught to grow, for example, with the morals and leadership skills they acquired at school. They were also taught not to question anything but to accept orders and or instructions as they came and to be upright as adults.

At St Michaels primary school in Alexandra Township, one teacher emphasised discipline, hard work, neatness and punctuality. Children were expected to be in his classroom at seven o'clock whereas school started at eight o'clock. He marked his books and returned them to the children on time.

He often said “if I can find you somewhere along life with holes at the back of your pants and elbows of your jacket torn I will say you are sitting and leaning on elbows and you are not working”. That teacher emphasised hard work and it became a pleasure. The teacher who

stressed discipline, hard work, neatness and punctuality seemed to be a person who led by example. This could be noted by the time at which he wanted learners to start their classes. The little time he took to mark and return books also bears testimony to that fact. Making hard work a pleasure is also another factor which shows that he led by example.

5.2 Indoctrination

There was subtle indoctrination in mission schools. For example, missionaries encouraged learners from St Michaels mission school in Alexandra Township to further their studies at St Peters near Johannesburg city centre and later Diocesan in Polokwane (then Pietersburg). One respondent said he is one of the children who completed primary education at St Michaels and continued with secondary education at St Peters before he went for the teacher's qualification at Diocesan in Polokwane. He added that, even after completion at Diocesan teachers' college in Polokwane, he continued to be a member of the Anglican Church. Another respondent said she became a permanent member of the Catholic Church because of its doctrines and influence on her from the time when she was a learner at Holy Cross Catholic mission school in Alexandra, Johannesburg.

It could thus be noted that missionaries such as the Anglican and Catholic missionaries did not want to lose membership. One of the ways of ensuring that was through indoctrinating learners to pursue studies from primary and beyond secondary level, for example, in the Anglican missionary school where the Anglican culture (norms and values) were upheld.

Mission schools perpetuated Christianity and English. Teachers often said "these two will take you places", said one respondent. He further said "Vernacular was a plus factor whereas arithmetic, geography, mental arithmetic and woodwork were emphasised as more important". Respondents from three different mission schools said they had to attend compulsory morning and evening church services on Sundays. At Bethel, for example, there were also special evening services for a few weeks before the Easter long weekend. Learners were further expected to communicate in English at times. Prefects

would see to it that that was adhered to. From this response, it could be noted that Christianity was emphasised over any other religion. English was emphasised at the expense of indigenous African languages.

5.3 Conformity

One respondent said “They were saying we should all be Christian believers and not paganists. We should not practise paganism. For instance, western music instruments were upheld more than the indigenous music of the Bapedi in Alexandra and Diocesan. Soccer, athletics, basketball, etc were promoted over indigenous activities such as *dibeke*, *diketo* and *kgathi*.” “Some of us were aware of these things although we did not question them because we wanted to complete the course and not disappoint our parents.” Learners were aware of being covertly forced to become Christians and not practise paganism. They did not object to that because they were afraid of being expelled for not conforming to the practice of Christianity and western music and other activities. They also did not want to disappoint their parents.

Mission schools such as St Peters catered for learners from poor family backgrounds. At the same time, mission schools prepared students to compete equally with all other people in the same labour market. For example, they provided the knowledge, language, skills and the correct attitude. However, the existing race laws such as the Group Areas Act of the land did not permit them to do so. Employment was reserved along racial lines during the apartheid years in South Africa. That is, the knowledge, skills and positive attitude which an African could have towards a particular job did not matter when it came to the labour market. For example, a nursing sister would be made to report to a white junior nursing staff member who qualified in the programme long after she (the former) was practising as a nursing sister. The white junior staff nurse’s qualifications were also lower than hers.

Some teachers and school subjects encouraged students to pursue certain careers. For example, hygiene and health education encouraged some students to pursue careers in nursing and

medicine. Some children admired their teachers and became teachers themselves. Many other people became carpenters and woodwork instructors in schools because their interest developed when they were studying woodwork at school.

6 FINDINGS OF THE ACTIVITIES AT MISSION SCHOOLS

The findings of the activities at mission schools indicate that these schools attempted to indoctrinate the learners through their aims and objectives. They further used various resources such as texts from the Bible (Romans 13) to influence learners to be conformists. In other words, they influenced learners to be humble toward their masters (colonialists) and to God. It is from these findings that the conclusion could be drawn.

7 CONCLUSION

From the above discussions on mission schools, it could be concluded that mission schools had certain aims and objectives. The mission schools subtly indoctrinated learners and promoted conformity. For example, the mission schools subtly indoctrinated learners to belong to the churches of the mission schools despite the Christian affiliation and cultural beliefs of learners. They promoted western activities and did not promote indigenous activities. African languages were neglected; nothing was done to develop and promote them. Some learners were aware of these aims, objectives and the promotion of western activities. Yet, some learners were aware of these activities – they conformed and never objected because they did not want to be regarded as defiant in the face of authority. Some were influenced by the aims and objectives of mission schools such as Christianity, discipline, punctuality and hard work. Certain activities and school subjects also influenced and motivated several learners to follow careers such as acting, carpentry, nursing, medicine and teaching.

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