

## AMERICAN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH IN THE DOMINIONS: MAKING THE CASE FOR DECENTRALIZATION IN INTERWAR SOUTH AFRICA

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*A surprising number of men in important positions in South Africa have either studied in America or spent a period in visiting American schools..These men have had the opportunity of reaping the harvest of American contributions to educational advancement.*

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The 1930s witnessed the beginnings of a critical examination of centralized educational administration in the Dominions of the British Commonwealth (South Africa, Australia, New Zealand and Canada). This article, an abridged version of a longer study, describes the efforts of a small network of educators, often with ties to Teachers College, Columbia, Carnegie Corporation, and the international progressive education movement, to promote a program for decentralizing the administration of education in South Africa.

As an educational issue, administrative decentralization hardly captured the public imagination. The landmark regional conferences of the London based New Education Fellowship (NEF), an organization dedicated to progressive education in Europe, and by extension, the emerging democracies of the British Commonwealth, heightened consciousness of small sections of the lay public in the Dominions, but it was teachers who understood the issues most clearly. School inspections, teacher training, appointments and promotions, setting curriculum, all controlled by centralized bureaucracies, imposed irksome controls on teachers and schools. Centralized control assured uniformed standards and access but left little room for innovation. In the 1930s, progressive educators, while still emphasizing the child

centered school with all its attendant issues, were also interested in class issues, curriculum reform, and in the United States, "social reconstruction."<sup>2</sup>

Integral to the issue of control was the relation between various levels of government and local communities in the financing of public education. Britain would have no Commonwealth institute for educational research until the 1930s. The search for new ideas often brought Commonwealth educators to North America.

In the 1920s Teachers College, Columbia University, emerged as the preeminent American institution in the field of Education.<sup>3</sup> Students from South Africa were among the first to attend the College in large numbers, maintaining ties to the College through a well organized alumni group.<sup>4</sup> In the late 1920s this connection was reinforced by the College's evolving relationship with New York's Carnegie Corporation. In 1923 Frederick Keppel, himself with long standing ties to Columbia, assumed the Presidency of Carnegie Corporation. James E. Russell, Teachers College's distinguished Dean, joined Keppel as his Special Assistant in 1926.

Keppel sought to broaden the Corporation's "Special Fund" work, then centered on Canadian higher education. In this Keppel was encouraged by another New York philanthropy, the Phelps Stokes Fund. Under Keppel's friend, Anselm Phelps Stokes, the Fund had extended its interests in American Negro Education to Africa.<sup>5</sup> Over time, personal friendship and shared professional interests led to informal cooperation. As Keppel wrote to Phelps-Stokes:

. . . I don't see why you shouldn't charge up Tanganyika and Uganda to the Carnegie account. In fact, if you have time to take a good look at the British Sudan on your way north from Uganda, I don't see why you shouldn't charge everything but your incidental visit to the Belgian Congo on us...As to my own wanderings, it is British Guiana and not New Guinea.<sup>6</sup>

In 1927-28 Russell visited Britain's African and Pacific Dominions and Colonies.<sup>7</sup> The following year Keppel and Corporation Secretary James Bertram retraced Russell's extensive tour.<sup>8</sup>

For Carnegie Corporation overseas development was uncharted territory. Rural infrastructure, race relations and public education in its broadest sense, were their usual concerns. Over fifty percent of Americans lived in rural areas, sometimes under conditions as rudimentary as those found on the South African Veld or Australian Outback. The ameliorative impact of the automobile, telephone and radio was relatively new, and the benefits accrued from boldly fashioned educational legislation, were incremental and uneven. One room schools existed less than an hours drive from New York City. It is not surprising then that when Keppel solicited project proposals in Cape Town, he was taken with an outline for a comprehensive study of South Africa's white poor, which the Corporation subsequently funded. The outline was drawn up by E.G. Malherbe, a tenth generation Afrikaner and a Teachers College Ph.D. who had recently joined the Education Faculty of the University of Cape Town (1924).

The findings of the Poor White Commission was published in September of 1932 amidst growing economic depression. What Keppel had endorsed in 1927 as a social science inquiry, now stood as a highly charged political document, demonstrating how in this "white man's country", Afrikaners bore the brunt of [white] economic discrimination. With [white] unemployment edging up to 300,000, national debate on the Commission's Report soon followed. Nineteen thirty-four saw two major "poor white" conferences. The first, a large international affair, was sponsored by the NEF. (Malhebe was a founder of the South African NEF.) Carnegie Corporation paid the travel expenses of Mabel Carney, John Dewey, and Harold Rugg, from Teachers College. All three, particularly Dewey and Rugg, had ties to the U.S. based Progressive Education Association (PEA).<sup>9</sup> Held in two sites and with over 4000 delegates, the conference put South Africa on the map as a country that was serious about progressive education. In October the Poor Relief Council of the Federated Dutch

Reformed Churches, held its own Volkskongres in Kimberely. This conference, less glamorous than the NEF, was to have more serious consequences since it was recognized as an important milestone in the coalescing of Afrikaner nationalism.

Malherbe, the principal investigator [and author] of the Education volume of the Commission's report, was awarded a Carnegie Travel Grant for 1933 to investigate issues that had arisen during his "poor white" field research.<sup>10</sup> His grant proposal, written in August of 1932, was surprisingly informal, suggesting how his relationship with Keppel had progressed.<sup>11</sup> At Keppel's urging he investigated poor whites in the American South as well as school finance in the U.S.A. and Canada. Malherbe's former Teachers College Office mate, Paul Mort, accompanied him to Canada.<sup>12</sup>

By the early 1930s Mort, like Malherbe, was developing into one of the more prominent educators of his generation. Mort had began his teaching career at 16 in a one room school in Indiana. After completing a B.A. degree at 21, he was employed as a high school principal and superintendent. Recruited by Dean Russell in 1920, Mort came to Teachers College, Columbia, completing an M.A. in 1922, and Ph.D. in 1924. After completing his dissertation, *The measurement of Educational Need: A Basis for Distribution of State Aid*, Mort was asked to join the Teachers College faculty.<sup>13</sup>

By the 1930s Paul Mort was one of the foremost American authorities on the financing of public education. He was particularly interested in the methods by which states with substantial variations in wealth and population could provide basic school programs that were of equal quality. The first decades of the century had demonstrated that simply providing funds through some centralized source did not take into account such complexities as the desire for local control of schools and the unique needs and conditions of school districts. Money by itself did not necessarily motivate districts to experiment with adjusting to new educational methods and ideas. There was no one formula for achieving what had become known as "equalization."

Mort's ideas on school finance were in part based on the earlier contributions of Ellwood P. Cubberley, Robert Haig, and his graduate school advisor, George D. Strayer. Like his predecessors, Mort believed that state's should provide educational opportunities with some minimum level of education common to all localities.<sup>14</sup> State and local taxes should be used to fund such programs, with local tax rates adjusted in relation to the economic circumstances of a community. Mort was also a strong advocate of a federal role in funding public education.<sup>15</sup> Just as within states there were communities with wide disparities in the ability to support education so were there poor and wealthy states. While the Strayer-Haig model of equalization, developed in the mid-1920s, stressed equalization and basic foundation programs, Mort's advances on this model stressed local initiatives and the identification of key districts (usually wealthy ones) upon which the local contribution of other districts could be set.<sup>16</sup>

Having developed a means by which an acceptable minimum school program could be measured, Mort sought to develop an objective means by which states could determine appropriate levels of funding for equalization programs. His mature ideas were set out in two important books, *State Support for Public Education* (1933), and *Federal Support for Public Education* (1936). Mort's research had shown that sparsely populated school districts were required to operate small schools spread over wide areas. Such districts could not achieve the economies of scale provided by larger schools, and school consolidation was not always possible. (Less populated districts might actually require more teachers than more populated ones.) By developing complex sets of regression equations, Mort was able to statistically estimate teacher/pupil ratios based on school attendance and size. He developed separate equations for primary and secondary schools, and found that a district could compute the average number of teachers it would require.<sup>17</sup> Thus the "weighting" of pupils in determining the number of teachers needed gradually became a basic component of determining an equalization formula.

Malherbe had long encouraged Mort to consider visiting South

Africa. Director of National Bureau of Educational and Social Research since 1929, he could offer Mort the opportunity to observe how equalization and innovation might proceed under different social and governmental conditions. In early 1935 Mort drafted a proposal for an exploratory study, matching up-to-date schools in American and South African communities. Initially rejected by Carnegie's outside reviewer as unclear and too unwieldy, Mort was brought into the review process and his second proposal was accepted.<sup>18</sup> Mort would compare how locally controlled and financed schools and centrally financed and controlled schools maintained minimum academic programs, and how each engaged in innovation to meet new educational needs. The central issue for Mort involved determining the effect of local social effort on schools.

Awarded a \$5000 grant, Mort arrived in South Africa in March, 1936. His visits to schools in the Union's four provinces gave him a first hand look at South African Education as well as necessary empirical foundation for theorizing. Mort visited 47 schools, recorded 110 interviews and surveyed administrative and supervisory personnel. He began a survey of educational literature and tackled the problem of constructing comparable units for measuring [white] school expenditures.<sup>19</sup>

The findings of Mort's work were published in book form as *Adaptability of Public School Systems* (1938).<sup>20</sup> Designed to be the prototype for a series of studies involving the Dominions, the book is awkward to follow.<sup>21</sup> Mort would have done well to stress the tentative, experimental nature of the research. While the emphasis is on theory, comparisons are made between the U.S. states discussed (New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, and Delaware) and the four provinces of South Africa. Of the dominions, Mort claimed South Africa provided "...the most satisfactory conditions for the initial study."

Like other Teachers College, Columbia, faculty who were interested in South Africa, Mort saw the country's development as simi-

lar to the United States.<sup>22</sup> It is noteworthy that in *Adaptability*, he omits mention of the United States' own parallel universe of segregation - the South. (Both Delaware and North Carolina practiced formal segregation in education.) Mort no doubt foresaw the difficulties inherent in discussing the race question. One could hardly speak of adaptation or equalization in South Africa's "native schools".<sup>23</sup> In the American South, advocates of state's rights were hostile to advancing a federal role in equalization, fearing a closer look at the structure of southern education, particularly its racial aspect.<sup>24</sup> Advocacy of a similar system for South Africa would suggest a preference for a uniform "native education" policy, itself a volatile issue. Whatever Mort's intentions, the result was to leave the impression that the two societies were similar and were confronting similar problems.

The central question of the "Adaptability" study concerns determining the circumstances under which school systems were willing to integrate either individual adaptations, or adaptation itself, as part of their structure. In the context of the school, adaptation was meant to mean "...the sloughing off of outmoded purposes and practices by school systems and the taking on of new ones to meet new needs."<sup>25</sup> The study attempted to illustrate how variations in method of support, control and size, influenced communities or school districts to innovate over a range of issues.

Mort's work was well received in South Africa, and some interesting findings did emerge. Mort was particularly intrigued by the apparent ability of South African schools to engage in innovation and adaptation without a strong local tax base and he wanted to examine this finding more closely. In an expanded second proposal written in 1936-37, Mort was assured of closer cooperation from the provincial education departments.<sup>26</sup> The Council of Provincial Administrators recommended school inspectors be assigned to work with the investigating team. There were also assurances of logistical support. Such assurance were most useful, since the Provincial Departments, critical of Mort's emphasis on urban schools, wanted the study to include a rural sample involving substantial traveling distances

and greater expense.<sup>27</sup> In the end Mort proposed comparing 40 urban communities in South Africa with 120 matched communities in the United States; There would also to be a matched sample of rural schools.<sup>28</sup>

In this expanded study, Mort would bring three research assistants (“field workers”) to South Africa for six months, and hire an additional seven in the United states for another six months. He would also have the personal services of an additional assistant for twenty months. The provinces were each to appropriate £500 (\$2500) to cover the costs of a school inspector visiting the United States for four months of field training.<sup>29</sup> And Malherbe was to take leave from NBESR.<sup>30</sup> It was a grand plan and expensive.

Mort’s initial budget of \$75,500, with a completion date of June 1938, was too rich for Keppel’s blood.<sup>31</sup> The Corporation’s Blue Sheet, the record of the Mort/Keppel budget interview, is cryptic; “What he has in mind..is a \$75,000 job”.<sup>32</sup> A \$62,700 budget followed, with scaled back plans for six months of field work and a completion date of June, 1939.<sup>33</sup> The financial aspect aside, Keppel worried about public opinion. Carnegie interest in African welfare and education had been viewed as foreign meddling. By the mid 1930s the Corporation was anxious about political trends in South Africa. White ethnic conflict and government intransigence on African rights, seemed to Keppel, to court disaster. Australia and New Zealand, of increasing strategic importance to Britain and the United States, were becoming more attractive for Corporation work.<sup>34</sup> A groundwork had been laid by Russell’s 1928 visit.<sup>35</sup>

. . . here is a great continent which is bound to play a great role in world affairs as affecting the Pacific. It is blood brother to us and will always be a “white man’s country”. It is trying out problems in democracy which..must inevitably be an example to us. It is an integral part of a ring around the Pacific beginning with Canada and our West Coast and running on to Hawaii, New

Zealand, Australia and the Philippines. We can't ignore it without lose.. The time is ripe for closer contacts and the safest way is through educational agencies.<sup>36</sup>

Within Australia and New Zealand, the Corporation's chief associates, Frank Tate and Kenneth Cunningham, functioned in much the same way as their South African counterparts. They worked through an educational body, the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), established in 1930. Like the University of London's Institute of Education, established in 1932, and headed by Fred Clarke after 1936, ACER received Carnegie support.<sup>37</sup>

In early 1936, as Mort prepared for his research in South Africa, his colleague, Isaac Kandel, Director of Teacher's Colleges' International Institute, embarked for a half year study of Education in Australia and New Zealand. As Kandel went about his work, Kenneth Cunningham, a Teachers College alumnus, inspired by his experience at the South African NEF Conference, arranged to make New Zealand and then Australia, sites for regional NEF conferences in 1937. Kandel was a featured speaker at both venues, with Teachers College and the PEA also represented by Edmund deS. Brunner and Harold Rugg. At the Australian NEF Malherbe introduced his research with Mort.<sup>38</sup> He was gauging public reaction.

In early 1938 Mort awaited word on his proposal. Encouraged by growing interest in his work, he was optimistic. Still Keppel hesitated, put off by the substantial cost and anxiety about a rapidly deteriorating world situation. In the end it was an assessment of *Adaptability...*, prepared by a Corporation associate, and President of the PEA, William Carson Ryan, that decided the issue. The review was prepared for Trustee Walter Jessup:

You ask me about Mort and Cornell's "Adaptability of Public Schools Systems", which I have just read. I answer with some reluctance, because starting out with a bias in favor of both Mort and Teachers College, I am distressed with what I find. The book seems to me incredibly bad.<sup>39</sup>

A careful reading of Ryan's review suggests that it was the review, as much as Mort's experimental work, that missed the mark. *Adaptability*.. would have been unsettling to anyone expecting conventional educational research. Mort himself, had struggled to clarify basic concepts. Although no formal letter survives in the Carnegie Archives, Mort's proposal was apparently tabled, ending any hope of continuing the project.

If Mort's pioneering work failed to get beyond the exploratory stage, his research and preliminary findings stimulated discussion and introduced new ideas. In time, Mort's ideas on school finance and control would find their way into educational vocabularies in all the Dominions. Writing Malherbe on the occasion of Mort's passing, Teachers Colleges' William S. Vincent noted that he had "...gained the impression that one of the most important experiences he [Mort] ever had was his visit to South Africa.<sup>40</sup>

Were Carnegie sponsored efforts early signatures of American intellectual and cultural expansion? The Carnegie presence in Britain's interwar Empire/Commonwealth defies easy characterization, especially in this short space. Anglo-American rivalries were often subtle, and mediated by such shared notions as the preeminence of [white] Anglo-Saxon Culture, and its "responsibilities" to less developed peoples. Progressive education, nested in the context of technologically advanced industrial democracies, provided another set of mediating values. By the late 1930s the Dominions of the Commonwealth were more preoccupied with the dangers of fascism and the prospect of world war than Anglo-American rivalries. The sunset of the British Empire and ascent of a Pax Americana still lay in the future.

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#### ENDNOTES

1. Paul A. Mort and Francis Cornell, *The Adaptability of Public School Systems*, New York, 1938, pp.118-119.
2. Patricia A. Graham, *Progressive Education: From Arcady to Academe*,

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- New York, 1967, pp.27-38, 60-84, 97-98.
3. Ronald K. Goodenow and Robert Cowen, "The American School of Education and the Third World in the Twentieth Century: Teachers College and Africa, 1920-1950". *History of Education*, Vol.15, No.4., 1986, 271-289.
  4. E. G. Malherbe, "Teachers College and South Africa", manuscript, 1936. E.G. Malherbe-Charles T. Loram Correspondence, File 422/2, Ernest Gideon Malherbe Papers, Killie Campbell Africana Library, University of Natal, Durban, S.A. (Hereafter E.G.M. Papers)
  5. Richard Hull, "The Phelps-Stokes Fund, African Education, and Agricultural Underdevelopment in Southern Africa:1903-1935.", *Africana Journal*, Vol. XVI, 1994, pp.84-101.
  6. Keppel to Phelps-Stokes, December 18, 1931. Box 72, Folder 1191. Phelps-Stokes Papers, Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University.
  7. The Special Fund was renamed The Dominions and Colonies Fund in 1926 following a first grant to Kenya Colony for Native Education project.
  8. Richard Glotzer, "The career of Mabel Carney:The Study of Race and Rural Development in the United States and South Africa", *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, Vol. 29, No.2., 1996, pp.1-28.
  9. Harold Rugg and W. Carson Ryan were the prime movers behind the PEA having formal (albeit weak) links with the NEF. *Progressive Education...*, p.98.
  10. See Malherbe's biography for his reminisces of the field work aspect of the poor white study. E.G. Malherbe, *Never a Dull Moment*, Cape Town, 1982.
  11. The question to be investigated; "...On what formula shall one allocate state subsidy to education so as not to penalize the poorer areas unduly, and at the same time to stimulate and encourage local initiative?"... is clear enough. There is no accompanying plan or method for study. Malherbe Grant Proposal. August 28, 1932. E.G.Malherbe Correspondence, Box 209, Grant Series I, CC.
  12. Malherbe's former chair from Cape Town's Education Faculty, Fred Clarke, now headed McGill's Faculty of Education. Richard Glotzer, "Sir Fred Clarke South Africa and Canada. Carnegie Philanthropy and the Ideology of the Commonwealth." *Education Research and Perspectives [Australia]*, Vol.22., No.1., June 1995, pp.1-21.
  13. Personal communication, Dr. Frank Cyr, April 15, 1989, Stamford, New

- York. Dr. Cyr (1900-1995) was a student of Mort's and a member of the Teachers College faculty from 1934-1965. Cyr is best remembered as "the father" of the yellow school bus.
14. Robert J. Garvue, *Modern Public School Finance*, (Toronto, 1969), 224-229.
  15. In the mid 1930s Mort chaired PEAs Committee on Federal Support to Education.
  16. *Ibid.* pp.224-229. Also see Mort's State Support for Public Schools New York, 1928.
  17. Paul A. Mort, *State Support for Public Education*, Washington, D.C., 1933, pp.90-128.
  18. Michael White has identified the same flexibility in grant procedures for the Corporation's Australian associates. Michael White, "A Revisitation of Carnegie Corporation Grants to Australia in the 1930s", Presidential Address, Australian and New Zealand History of Education Society, Brisbane, July 1996. Also Coffman to Russell, February 3, 1996, Russell to Coffman, February 17, 1996, and Coffman to Keppel, February 20, 1996. All Letters W.F. Russell Papers, CC.
  19. Statistical analysis was Mort's forte, and he quickly discovered that demographic factors distorted South African statistics which initially suggested that unit expenditures for education were slightly higher than in the United States. Closer examination showed that sparsity of population accounted for the differences.
  20. Paul A. Mort and Frances G. Cornell, *Adaptability of Public School Systems*, (New York, 1938). Frances Cornell, Mort's research assistant (and bridge partner) was not involved in the South African aspect of the project.
  21. Mort, "Supplement To The Memorandum Submitted On October 14, 1936 Petitioning For Funds To Carry Out A Study Of One Aspect Of The Problem of School Support." pp.2., Mort File, CC.
  22. Mort and Cornell, *Adaptability...*, pp.116.
  23. See R. Hunt Davis, "The Administration and Financing of African Education in South Africa 1910-1953.", in *Apartheid and Education*, 127-138.
  24. In 1938 the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that states operating racially separate school systems were required to provide equal facilities. This requirement opened the door to possible compliance inspections. See *Gaines v Missouri*, in M.M. Chambers, *The Colleges and the Courts*, 1946-50., New York, 1952, pp.16-29.

25. Mort and Cornell, *Adaptability...*, ix.
26. Paul Mort, "A Proposed Study of One Aspect of the Problem of School Support" [Local versus Central Support in Relation to the Ease or Difficulty of Adaptation to New Needs]. Submitted to Carnegie Corporation, 1937. Mort File, CC.
27. *Ibid*, p.7.
28. *Ibid*, p.8.
29. *Ibid*, p.5.
30. *Ibid*, p.9-10.
31. Mort, "A proposed Study..." , p.4. Mort File, CC.
32. Keppel/Mort Blue Sheet, November 5, 1936. Mort File, CC.
33. *Ibid*.
34. The Corporation had just agreed to fund an extensive examination of the Pacific Dominions (primarily Australia) to be carried out by C. Hartley Grattan, a prominent writer on political and economic issues. Laurie Hergenhan, *No Casual Traveler, Hartley Grattan and Australia-US Connections*, Queensland, 1994.
35. Following Russell's 1928 visit to the Pacific, Carnegie Corporation, aided by Charles Rush, TC's Librarian, compiled an extensive list of [American] books in Education and Psychology (approx. 125), many written by Teachers College, Columbia Faculty. Collections were then offered gratis to Teacher Training Colleges, Universities and Directors of Education in Australia and New Zealand. "Australia and New Zealand 1929 Distribution of Books file", Box 50, Grant Series One, CC.
36. Russell to Keppel. April 2, 1928. Grant Series One, Box 316.
37. The lack of a Council or Bureau had been one of Fred Clarke's chief criticisms of Canadian Education.
38. Kandel was tactful in his published [public] observations on Education. His private report to Keppel was far more severe. Cf. I.L. Kandel; *Impressions of Education in New Zealand and Inverted Snobbery and the Problem of Secondary Education*, Studies in Education No.2., N.Z. Council For Ed. Research, 1937, also *Types of Administration (with particular reference to the educational systems of New Zealand and Australia)*, Melbourne, 1938, and "Report on New Zealand and Australia", Typescript, 1938, CC. For Malherbe's Comments see K.S. Cunningham (Ed), *Education for Complete Living*, Melbourne, 1938, also Leicester Webb, *The Control of Education in New Zealand*, New Zealand Council for Education, Whitcomb and Tomb Ltd., Auckland 1937. (I am indebted to Professor White for sharing Kandel's private

report with me.)

39. William Carson Ryan was with the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (1936-40), he had previously been with the Rockefeller Commonwealth Fund. A member of the NEF, Ryan was President of the Progressive Education Association from 1937-39. Ryan to W.Jessup, May 27, 1938. Mort File, Box 229, GS1, CC.
40. Vincent to Malherbe, November 12, 1962. file 422-2, E.G.M. Papers.