

**'Breaking barriers': education and schooling in contemporary
South Africa**

SOUTH AFRICAN GIRL'S SCHOOL ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE
GRAHAMSTOWN
30 MAY 2007

Introduction

Good afternoon and welcome to iRhini/Grahamstown.

And in the hope that your host, Ms. Madeline Schoeman, who is also an esteemed member of the Rhodes University Council, has provided time for you to walk through our beautiful campus, or better still has organised for you a guided tour of Rhodes, a warm welcome in advance to Rhodes University.

I hope those of you who lead secondary schools already have your students enrolling with us. If you don't as yet, I hope you will give us an opportunity during your stay here to provide you with compelling reasons as to why you should encourage your students to make Rhodes their university of first choice, as an institution that is committed to being the university 'where leaders learn' – as our slogan proclaims.

Thank you for the kind invitation to address this gathering of the South African Girl's School Association. I am acutely aware that on the part of society, government, parents and students there are huge expectations of our schools, and by implication of yourselves and teachers. So permit me to begin by expressing my admiration for you, who have assumed the challenging responsibility of leading our country's schools, often under less than ideal and optimal conditions and circumstances.

I take the theme of 'breaking barriers' that you have chosen for this conference as a signal of your determination and commitment to firstly address and find ways of dissolving the variety of impediments that stand in the way of schools and their leaders and teachers creating an environment that enables our girls and young women to realize their potential and talents; and secondly, to also address the obstacles experienced by young girls and young women with respect to equity of access, opportunity and outcomes with respect to school education.

In thinking about this address I have taken note of the themes on which a number of excellent people that will be addressing you over the next few days. I am especially pleased that two Rhodes colleagues, professor's Macleod and de Klerk will be addressing questions of gender and language. Accordingly I have decided to approach the issue of barriers at a macro level in the hope that it will contribute to framing your deliberations. I should, however, declare that in addressing you I am all too aware that unlike me you confront on a daily basis the concrete realities of these and other barriers and the challenge of overcoming them.

Barriers

To begin with, I wish to address a somewhat ignored and yet serious impediment to education through schools - a barrier that is less concrete as it is intellectual and conceptual, and yet precisely for this reason is significant as it can imprison our thinking and actions rather than facilitate a different kind of thinking and action.

All too often we focus on the outcomes of schooling, with an accompanying tendency to reduce these to social functions such as preparing students for entering universities or technical colleges, or skilling them to enter the labour force, be productive workers and

contribute to economic development, and the like. Our focus also tends, furthermore, to be on the methodologies, methods, techniques and technologies of education, especially those deemed to be appropriate to preparing students for the specified social functions.

A sad casualty of such discourses is that there is absence or lack of any serious contemplation or discussion of a fundamentally important issue: the meaning of education and the core purposes of education through schools, colleges or universities. So the first and foremost barrier to education, I want to suggest, is the silence on what is education, and what specifically is education that is appropriate for our country's schools and young girls and women.

One way of thinking about education is that it is an engagement between dedicated teachers and students around present-day humanity's intellectual, cultural and scientific inheritances (in the form of books, art, pictures, music, artefacts), and around our historical and contemporary understandings, views and beliefs regarding our natural and social worlds¹. In this vein of thinking, education is the pursuit of learning in and through language/s of nature and society, which is undertaken as part of what it means to be human and for its intrinsic significance, rather than for external utilitarian or instrumental ends.

Martha Nussbaum argues, a liberal education is intimately connected to the idea of democratic citizenship, and to the cultivation of humanity. And suggests that 'three capacities, above all, are essential to the cultivation of humanity' (ibid, 2006:5).

'First is the capacity for critical examination of oneself and one's traditions – for living what, following Socrates, we may call the "examined

¹ See Fuller, T (ed.) (1989) *The Voice of Liberal Learning: Michael Oakeshott on Education*. London: Yale University Press

life"....Training this capacity requires developing the capacity to reason logically, to test what one reads or says for consistency of reasoning, correctness of fact, and accuracy of judgement' (ibid, 2006:5).

The 'cultivation of humanity', according to Nussbaum, also requires students to see themselves 'as human beings bound to all other human beings by ties of recognition and concern' – which necessitates knowledge and understanding of different cultures and 'of differences of gender, race, and sexuality' (Nussbaum, 2006:6).

Third, it is, however, more than 'factual knowledge' that is required. Also necessary is 'the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person's story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have' (ibid, 2006:6-7).

Now it can be contended that this is an old-fashioned and even romantic notion of education. Where are the references to outcomes, fundamental and elective learning, critical outcomes and critical cross-field outcomes – the stock in trade of outcomes-based education and the national qualification framework! But that precisely is the point: that we confuse and substitute approaches to education with substantive discussion on the meaning of education and what it means to be educated.

To be sure there are debates to be had about language/s and the objects of learning and study, and curriculum, but these ought to be less in relation to 'relevance' to external ends as much as in relation to the meaning of education and its fundamental purpose. The first and fundamental barrier to effective schools and education may therefore be our obsession with secondary and subsidiary issues instead of the fundamental issue of what constitutes education.

Beyond this, the barriers to education and schooling in contemporary South Africa are all too familiar.

The social structures and relations of our recent past – the relations of ‘race’, class and gender – continue to be reproduced in various ways in our contemporary society and remain ongoing obstacles to education and effective schooling. Much higher proportions of girls and young women who are black and of rural and urban poor and working class backgrounds drop-out of schools and are denied effective education. Over 60% of African children come from households that have a n income of less than R 800 per month. Conversely over 60% of white children come form households that earn more than R 6 000 a month. It is no accident that the poorest provinces and districts of our country perform the poorest with respect to a range of educational indicators.

It should be clear that it is not just ‘race’ but the coincidence of ‘race’ and class that determines equity of opportunity in contemporary South Africa. Conversely, black girls and young women from middle-class and wealthy families that posses the necessary financial resources and cultural capital, alongside white girls and young women are the major beneficiaries of opportunities provided by high quality schools – in the main the well-resourced independent schools and so-called ‘Model C’ schools. Notwithstanding significant changes in our society since 1994, access to, retention within, and success in schools continue to follow the contours of ‘race’ and class.

Jody Kollapen, the Chairperson of our Human Rights Commission, eloquently captures our context when he observes that:

...the reality remains that for millions of people the promise of human rights and the vision of a just and caring world remains an illusion. Intolerance, war and impunity; starvation and greed; power

and powerlessness all combine in a conspiracy of the powerful against the weak that invariably deepens the faultlines that exist in the world and within nations.

(T)hese millions... see a world where disparities in wealth, resources and opportunities have grown, where human rights norms and values seem invariably to yield to the dictates of the rich and powerful; which expresses shock and outrage at arbitrary killing but at the same time is complicit in the killing of many more thorough hunger and disease – which could have been avoided (Kollapen, 2003:26).

We have much to celebrate, to be proud of, for the achievements of the past twelve years of democracy are real and considerable. As a free South Africa we are not plagued by some of the ills that Kollapen so vividly describes. But, if we are brutally honest, we are not entirely spared from all of them.

We continue to be one of the most unequal societies on earth in terms of 'disparities' in wealth, income, opportunities, and living conditions. The 'faultlines' of race, class, gender and geography are still all too evident. Hunger and disease, poverty and unemployment continue to blight our democracy. Millions of our fellow citizens are mired in desperate daily routines of survival while, alongside, unbridled individualism and crass materialism, and a vulgar mentality of "greed is cool" and "get what you can and screw the rest" runs rampant in our society.

Yet for the sake of social justice, our humanity, and our future, we must refuse 'to accept the logic of inequality and the repression that it involves', and continue to 'search for human agency, for the means through which inequality can be undone' (Hammami, 2006:32).

Or, as Kollapen puts it,

We need to be creative and bold...to challenge poverty and inequality, to reshape the way society is structured and does its business and, importantly, to ensure that the concept of the 'oneness of humanity'...comes to mean just that (2003:26).

Bertolt Brecht writes of the 'struggle of the mountains' and the 'battle of the plains'. If the vote and citizenship for all are the mountains, they have been largely won. It is now the infinitely more arduous and protracted 'battle of the plains', of creating an equitable, just, and humane society in which equal rights are progressively translated to equity of opportunities and outcomes that must be joined and won.

One area where there is cause for satisfaction is the representation of girls and young women in schooling. The education statistics produced by the Department of Education in November 2006 make clear that gender equity in so far as participation by girls and young women in schooling is concerned has been more or less accomplished. In 2005, 54% of matric candidates were women, 67% of whom passed, 16% with endorsement and 51% without endorsement. Moreover, more women than men pass with distinctions and merit. Furthermore, women constitute 53% of all university enrolments. Challenges, however, of course, remain with respect to performance in particular subjects and the subject areas in which women tend to be concentrated at universities. Moreover, patriarchy and sexism continue to stifle the realization of the talents of girls and women and the contribution they can make to the development of our society. The rape and abuse of women is a pervasive, morbid ill that destroys innumerable lives and wreaks havoc in our country.

Is there anything or much that government and schools can do about minimising girls and young women from black and poor families dropping-

out of schools and ensuring that they are provided equity of opportunity and effective education? Without doubt!

To begin with there is an undeniable and well-established link between socio-economic conditions and opportunity in schooling. Unless and until there is a significant improvement in the economic and social circumstances of millions of black and poor South Africans spearheaded by government and wholly embraced by the beneficiaries of our new democratic order, the burden of school drop-out and restricted educational opportunities will continue to be borne by particular social groups. Great inequalities of income and wealth is a guarantee that not only will South Africa be an inherently unstable society but that it will also be a grossly inefficient society in that the talents of thousands of young people will continue to be wasted and unrealized because they are denied opportunities for economic and social advancement and to contribute to economic and social development. The elimination of extreme inequalities of income, wealth and by association also opportunity are not only moral and social imperatives but also an economic necessity.

Schools and education cannot on their own, as is often thought, transform and develop our society. They are necessary conditions of transformation and development but not sufficient conditions. That is to say, there must be simultaneous transformatory and development initiatives in other arenas of our society if schools are to play an optimal role in our society. However, this is not to suggest that there is nothing that schools can do or contribute.

Today, 10% of our some 7 000 secondary schools – the independent and Model C schools - produce 60% of all (total of 86 531 in 2005) senior certificate endorsements. Another 10% of the historically black schools – including the Department of Education's Dinaledi schools – produce a further 20% of all senior certificate endorsements. The remaining 20% of

senior certificate endorsements are produced by 80% of public secondary schools.

Let me acknowledge that lack of funding and resources is a third barrier to effective schools and education. Let me also acknowledge unqualified teachers that lack in content knowledge and curriculum and pedagogic expertise, if not always in dedication, as a fourth barrier to effective education.

However, the greater funding and resources of the independent and Model C schools is only a partial reason for the superior performance of these schools. And as important as are qualified, competent and dedicated teachers, these too are not the whole story. A key element is also visionary and effective leadership and management – on the part of a range of actors that include the Ministry of Education, provincial ministries, district offices and, of course, school heads. Indeed, it has been argued that a key distinguishing feature between the 10% of the historically black schools that produce 20% of all senior certificate endorsements and the 80% of public secondary schools that produce 20% of senior certificate endorsements is effective educational leadership and management.

This is not to explain effective schools and education in terms of lone and heroic individual education leaders for leadership may be collective. But it is to emphasise – as has been demonstrated by some poorly resourced rural schools – that educational leadership and management within which funds and resources can be put to work and dedicated teachers can perform is hugely important. Thus, a fifth barrier to effective schools and education is frequently the absence of educational leadership.

Language should be a readily recognisable sixth barrier. Many students learn and study in a language which is their second or third language. This

is major impediment to the conceptual development of students. The problem of mathematics education is as much a problem of proficiency in the English language. How do you grasp important concepts – whether in mathematics or sociology – and achieve a mastery of the natural and social sciences without mastery of English. There is increasing concern on the part of universities about the language proficiency of entering students and their associated under-preparedness for the rigours of the pursuit of higher learning and university education. This under-preparedness is not only on the part of black students who have English as their second or even third language but also on the part of white students who are English speaking.

Conclusion

I wish to conclude by noting that Albert Einstein had a sign in his office that read: not everything that can be counted counts and not everything that counts can be counted.

It helps to me to return to my first barrier to education and to emphasise that the school and education that we should be concerned with should and must be much more than about pursuing 'race', gender and disability equity targets, changing demographics, numbers and proportions, and achieving pass and graduation rates, important as all these are in the light of our apartheid legacy.

Education is fundamentally about 'learning to look, to listen, to think, to feel, to imagine, to believe, to understand, to choose, to wish' (Oakeshott in Fuller, T (ed.), 1989:67). Your principal task and mine I submit is to educate, to create the optimal environment for educating, in some cases to courageously rebuild and restore an institutional culture of learning and teaching, and to tirelessly emphasize that any meaningful education is a partnership between teachers and students – a partnership that must be

grounded in knowledge, expertise, compassion and dedication on the part of teachers, and on the part of students a commitment to learn, to study and to exercise effort. Without such a principled partnership there can be no education and no effective schooling.