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The Responsibility of the Teacher

Address to Students — College of Education — 1st June, 1960.

by MARY McLARTY

TODAY South Africa enters the next 50 years! It is a solemn thought.

I think we can say that the quality of our life when we enter the second century of our national existence, i.e. in the year 2010, will depend largely on what is done in our schools in the next half-century and that means you and your successors.

It is a truism to say that the changed pattern of our social life — a pattern that takes the mother out of the home into the market-place — throws an increasing burden of responsibility upon the teacher.

Adjustments to social changes are slow—unless they come by way of revolution and then they cannot rightly be called adjustments — and it is clear that working mothers have not yet succeeded in achieving a satisfactory balance between their lives as workers and their responsibilities in the home. (I may say, in passing, that life seems always to make greater demands on women than on men. But perhaps I am biassed!) That women will, in time, make this adjustment, I am confident.

But meanwhile the responsibility of the teacher is very great.

I begin by saying that Education is a means by which the tradition of a people — of a civilization — is handed on from one generation to another. But also, education, by encouraging that spirit of enquiry, which is the natural desire of the young to find answers to their questions, ensures progress. Tradition then becomes a stabilising factor without standing in the way of response to the demands of change.

Toynbee sees history as a process of Challenge and Response. Gilbert Murray, the greatest Humanist of our time, saw history in terms of alternate periods of chaos and cosmos. He considered the first half of this century one of chaos, of breaking down. I would say categorically that the reason for our present discontents, our obvious failure as a nation at this moment in our history, is that too much emphasis has been laid on the past and there has been too little encouragement of that freedom of the mind which is the passport to greatness both in men and nations.

We have not responded to the challenge of our geographical situation on the continent of Africa, nor have we been sensitive to the inter-play of human relationships in our multi-racial society.

In this second half of the century, after two destructive world wars that were waged, we thought, in the hope and belief that the future would be more free for all men, everywhere, we here should have already begun to build a Cosmos, a country of ordered friendships and co-operation.

It is not too late.

You, with your youthful vigour and enthusiasm fired by the idealisms that are the finest part of being young, can repair the damage that my generation has done or condoned — condoned through complacency, the first and the last sin. For life is a battlefield and there is no discharge in the war.

You as teachers will be, possibly, the greatest moulders of public opinion, for the attitude of mind of your pupils, when they become adults, members of the body politic, will be the reflection of your success or failure.

There is the challenge.

There is your responsibility.

I make a great claim and I make no apology for it.

This by way of introduction. Let us examine the matter further.

How can you, as teachers, translate these high-sounding ideas into the routine of every-day life in the classroom?

I shall now think aloud and go with you into your future classroom — First, into the rooms of the Grades Teacher where there is need for endless patience. The foundation must be made deep and strong. Here habits are formed; habits of consideration for others, gentleness, politeness, working together; the co-ordination of mind and body which later leads to manipulative skills; the joy of rhythm, the recognition of colours.

Much of this will have been begun in the home and at the Nursery School but here it is done together in the "Big School" and that is important for the child. The process of teaching the child to read, to write, to count, is slow. Don't let anyone hurry you, neither the Principal nor the Inspector. Find your own pace and that of the children. The recipe is love and trust. I have always envied those who do the beginnings of such an important task.

Thence we go on to the eight to twelve, or it may be seven to eleven, age-group. We have five years of expanding interests. The world outside the home and the school is there to be explored. The steady building up of the techniques of learning, reading, speech, writing, arithmetic, continues, patiently, expertly, and it is for you to find the best methods based on your training. At this stage, in tune with the child's exploring mind, the teacher will aim at the development of an aesthetic sense, a feeling for music, form, colour, the art of expression. A growing awareness of the beauty of the earth is encouraged through a love of animals (usually easy, for most children have pets to care for), and the trees, flowers, birds, of garden or park. I think this is important for the town child as an antidote to the urban scene. At this age too the teacher will encourage an awareness of the beauty of goodness, by the school's religious tone, scripture teaching, stories of the heroes of the past and the lives of noble men and women. I sometimes think the Standard IV and V teacher must be omniscient!

But remember that these are the years of physical high spirits, which have to be disciplined for the common good, but disciplined by consent. How this is done in a class of forty plus you are, no doubt, learning in your teaching practice and from your lecturers. Perhaps the answer lies in appealing to the adventure of learning.

The boy or girl is now ready for the stress and strain of adolescence, and the teacher must be ready to face children growing up. With the higher school-leaving age, our Province has developed differentiated curricula in the high school. It is, in a way, a period of experimentation, for there are dangers — the danger of a too wide diffusion of so-called subjects with lessened time for essentials. I believe there is a common core of knowledge which can be simple enough but must not be neglected. The teacher has to find the way to cope with laziness, for there is much of this and it is a natural physiological part of growth. He has to deal with the evil of too great introspection. It is not accidental that so much emphasis is laid on sport. And for the non-sporting types there are countless other practical and absorbing interests that most schools, through enthusiastic members of staff, find time to encourage. It is too early to assess the way in which counselling has been introduced as a "subject". To me it is a by-product of the good teacher and I am extremely critical of any attempt to encourage young people to dig into their own thoughts and motives. From experience I would say the motto should always be "Look outward". Syllabuses should be used with discretion. They are always over-crowded. It has always seemed to me that there should be someone to put a curb on the specialists and to say "this much and no more is essential". The high school stage, if not the most important, is certainly the most exciting. Here we have the idealism and aspirations of youth to be guided, to be encouraged. Every pupil must be given the opportunity to do something well and to fit into the life of the school as a person in his own right. And you will find, what you probably know, that the so-called naughty ones are likely to emerge as leaders. Give them scope for action and energy.

There will be examinations. In spite of all efforts to do away with them, they survive. It is indeed difficult to do without them. I believe all but the most nervous should be able to take them in their stride. Matriculation is a passport to the future and should be looked upon as such and not an end in itself. The good teacher will also see that his pupils become aware of the community of which they are a part. Most schools have their own way of dealing with this necessary aspect of high school life. Parents are part of this community. Welcome them and cooperate with them.

In conclusion, I give you my best wishes for the future. You will enter into an exciting and rewarding profession. I hope it will bring happiness to you all.