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Education and Democracy — a challenge to first-year students*

K TOBER

A few years ago legislation was passed to bind together the two institutions, jointly responsible for the training of teachers in this country: the Colleges of Education and the Universities. This decision signifies, better than any detailed argument could, that education which you as future teachers have chosen to serve is an on-going process from pre-school years beyond your University degree into your future professional life. I personally welcome, therefore, an opportunity to address you today in the knowledge that your future performance will not only determine the quality of your own pupils at primary and high school level, but also the standard which we at the Universities have to accept as the given basis of our own teaching and research.

You are about to enter training for the much maligned, certainly under-paid and indispensable profession of teaching. Your career is likely to be determined by two goals you will be asked to achieve: to master the subjects you have chosen to teach and to acquire the skills to teach them.

As teachers you will very probably, as no other generation of teachers before, have to respond to a call to contribute to the on-going process of reform in education, with the aim to establish better schools and higher standards for more pupils of all backgrounds, who will spend longer years at school than ever before. If the educational principle now adopted almost universally, namely that of an equal opportunity for all people to study and to learn in order to fulfil their own potential, is to be accepted fully in this country, it will have to be married to the ideal of personal ability and achievement.

Whenever a people face an educational crisis, it is invariably a signal for a national crisis.

Without dramatising these obvious and much-quoted facts within our own national context, and taking into account the educational ambitions of all the South African nations, it might perhaps be true to say that we have not got enough children in our high schools, not enough matriculants at our Universities, not enough graduates necessary for our culture and economy, not enough trained teachers who should preferably all, including the primary school teachers, have at least three years of a University education.

You as the future teachers are likely to be called upon to assist in the implementation of educational reforms with a dual aim: to make sure that all members of our society, irrespective of their racial identity, will as individuals be able to realise their inherent right to the full development of their gifts and abilities, so that they may achieve their full potential and will be able to live their personal, social and professional lives as their own sense of responsibility dictates.

When I speak of reform, I am not merely referring to the well-known fact that both here and overseas, the last decade alone has seen more educational reforms than half the century before. I am rather referring to the universal wish, valid and accepted also in South Africa, where it will have to be adapted to our special conditions, to provide for the socially, economically and culturally disadvantaged an educational system which will fully compensate that disadvantage.

It may well be that in the near future special attention will have to be given not only to University admission procedures without lowering graduation standards but in the long term to the pre-school years and to flexibility in admission and promotion procedures in our secondary and tertiary educational systems. Whether or not the continental system recently introduced to integrate 3 and 4-year-olds into a planned educational pattern embracing primary, secondary and tertiary education, is adaptable to our own conditions is a matter requiring very careful investigation.

I would encourage you not to be blinded by educational jargon which not infrequently replaces the solutions to real problems by a flood of fashionable words. You should try to remember a simple fact which the Greeks and Romans were so conscious of: that yours will be a key role in this nation. As Cicero said: "What greater or better gift can we offer the Republic than to teach and instruct our youth." Like many of his contemporaries, he saw a long time ago that the future of a nation depends very largely on the quality of the education its teachers can supply.

In saying this I am not staking any special claim for the recognition of educators.

It may serve us well to take, from time to time, a critical look at ourselves and to remember that owls are not really wise—they only look that way —and that the owl is a sort of College professor.

Teachers will invariably be criticised for what they do, since the results of our activities remain largely invisible

The activists of this world will always attempt to ridicule us and say, as George Bernard Shaw did: "He who can does, he who cannot, teaches."

You will frequently find yourselves at the end of intellectual cynicism, as expressed in Oscar Wilde's dictum "everybody who is incapable of learning has taken to teaching."

Encloistered in these walls for the next few years apart from occasional sorties into the Wits Campus, you will have to find your own balance between acquiring knowledge and gaining wisdom.

It is you who will have to prove the Greek proverb wrong as to what teaching is, namely, "the same persons telling the same people the same things about the same things." You will come to realise that it is always safe to learn from our enemies, that it is seldom safe to venture to instruct, even our friends. I certainly hope that you will learn to love instruction because only then are you likely to be well instructed.

The more you learn, the less easily will you be to lead, the more difficult you will prove to be governed and hopefully it will be impossible to en-

* An address to first-year students at the Johannesburg College of Education, January 1978.

slave you There is about teaching an element of novelty and surprise because your education will enable you to do what you have never done before.

Underlying all education should be an element of respect, not only for what you learn and for your teacher but the essential respect of the teacher, for the pupil. It is the latter which I would urge you not to forget, particularly in the initial stages of your future professional career.

You may well feel, especially during your first year of training, that your College and my University are a kind of prison and even worse, because in a prison, for instance, you are not forced to read books written by the warders and by the governor and that in prison they may torture your body but they do not torture your brains.

Whenever you feel that way you had better remember the English proverb recorded before 1500 "that it is better to be unborn than untaught." Do not expect your own education to solve your personal problems and those of your community because education is not an object but is a method to cope with yourselves and with the stresses of your society's existence. In the end you will judge yourselves and will be judged as teachers, not by how much you have committed to memory or even how much you know but by your ability to differentiate between what you know and what you don't; it is knowing where to go to find out what you need to know and it is knowing how to use that information once you get it.

You will be taught in this Institution not an education as such, but the means of education, and the day will come when you will accept the truth of a statement not by a left-wing radical but by Confucius: "that in teaching there should be no class distinction."

As teachers you would do well to remember at all times that a school is without doubt the most important laboratory of democracy, the supreme training centre for an understanding of the rule of law in the interest of the people. Schools can and should provide essential guidance in citizenship.

It is at school that children first experience fully social reality, the necessity of mastering situations and of solving conflict. In this wider social context the transmission of knowledge, skills and abilities from teacher to pupil assumes a significance far beyond the boundaries of a classroom.

You will, as teachers, be able to bring about the liberation of young minds, a true emancipation, by leading your pupils into independence of judgement, an understanding of responsible action, and creative thinking. What a challenge for you as future teachers, to educate your pupils in the appreciation of tolerance, to teach them respect for the dignity of their fellow men and to offer them an understanding of cultural, ethical and religious values so that you may arouse in them a preparedness for meaningful and constructive social action. If these are to be your goals as future teachers you will have to aim at more than an accumulation of factual knowledge by merely programming your pupils. You will have to teach them not to supply the prepared answers but to ask the right questions.

Such an attitude on your part will shape the objectives of your teaching, the content of your lectures, the methods of your instruction, the strategy of your tuition and the eventual evaluation of your successes and failures.

During the next few years of your training disappointments and hardships will occur; when this happens do not forget that the human rewards in your future profession are immeasurably greater than any difficulty you may face.

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to this College and on behalf of my University I wish you well in your future career.