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education for the future south africa*

FRANCIS WILSON

I should like to start with a story. It goes back to the time of the wool boom in the 1950s when the sheep farmers of the Eastern Cape were doing well. So well in fact that one year a farmer bought himself a Rolls Royce with which he was mightily pleased. Then, the very next year, the same farmer ordered himself a second Rolls Royce. The manufacturers were delighted that somebody should want a Rolls Royce two years running and thought that if they could find out why this farmer, tucked away in a remote corner of South Africa, wanted two of their cars, it would help in their advertising. So they sent out a man to tell the farmer how delighted they were and to ask him just what it was about their cars that he liked so much. "Ag man", he replies, "It's like this: I like the glass partition. The Rolls Royce is perfect for carrying sheep because, with that partition, they can't breathe down your neck." Although it is a very splendid vehicle for transporting people around, a Rolls Royce is not a particular suitable machine for transporting sheep — unless of course one thinks that some of the people who drive around in Rolls Royces are in fact sheep. The problem essentially is one of appropriateness. If one wishes to transport sheep, fairly cheaply, around the flat, hot land of the Karoo without causing undue discomfort to the shepherd, one will design some sort of a vehicle but it won't end up looking like a Rolls Royce.

In the same way we should assess the appropriateness of our education system. To do this let us consider three questions:

> What are the aims of education?
>
> What do we know about the context in which this education will be used?
>
> What design of the education system would be appropriate in that context?

What are the aims of education? I do not wish to bore you with a summary of the reading which, as an amateur with no formal training in education, I had to do for this talk but I do think that we should discuss a few of the writers and thinkers partly to convey the extraordinary consensus that seems to run through the thinking over the years all the way from Socrates to Paulo Freire, and partly to highlight the fact that we are currently living through a ferment of thinking about education particularly in the primary schools. It is a time of great excitement in the world of education.[1] There is Ivan Illich[2] arguing that we should do away with all schools: there is Paulo Freire[3] on conscientisation; John Holt[4] on how children learn and why they fail; there is Jean Piaget[5], the epistemologist, on the theory of knowledge; Michael Huberman[6] reflecting on the democratisation of education; Everett Reimer saying "school is dead, long live education";[7] there is Lowenfeld[8] discussing creative and mental growth, looking specifically at art; there is Suzuki with his whole new concept as to how children can learn music. There is Cuisenaire with his rods[9], what my youngest daughter calls "thinking sticks". And, of course, there is Edward de Bono, with his invitation to small boys to design their own chocolate-making machines.[10]

What, then, can we distil from all this ferment? First, because deeds speak louder than words, is the lesson that teaching or education can, indeed should, be a disturbing, disruptive and dangerous business. One thinks of Socrates;[11] of Jesus of Nazareth; one thinks of Paulo Freire exiled from Brazil. Speaking here last year, Alan Paton said, "It is when one leaves the realm of safe and certain knowledge that education begins".[12] It is a dangerous business.

The second thing that wise teachers are telling us is that people are people. They

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are not slaves, they are not cogs designed to fit nicely into a well oiled social machine in order simply to keep it running, producing more and more coal mines, gold mines, factories or whatever. People are not sheep either. We are as Robert Browning said somewhere, "a God though in the germ". "What is the goal of schools?", asks Jean Piaget, and answers with another question. "Is it not to form creators, innovators, rather than individuals who will repeat that which has been learnt by preceding generations?"[13] Innovators, creators, not parrots. Everett Reimer draws the distinction between schooling and education: People are **schooled** to accept a society as it is rather than to recreate one.[14] So there is this whole element of creation: a God though in the germ. Education is also, as Paulo Freire has said, about liberation not domestication. The Latin root **educo,** of the word education reminds us that our vocation is to lead out, not to hold in or constrain. In a remarkable open letter from Prague, published recently in **Encounter,**[15] Valclav Havel writes of the cost at which order has been obtained in that society: the cost of the freedom of the spirit. South Africans will find much that is uncannily familiar in Havel's description of Czechoslovakia. Education cannot be authoritarian and yet, as Piaget points out, our supreme fault is excessive authority.

From liberation we move on to see that education is also about awareness and understanding. Teilhard de Chardin has suggested that man's growth can be measured by his increasing awareness or understanding of himself. It has been further suggested that society also should be measured not in terms of its Gross National Product, or its growth rate per annum, but rather in terms of the capacity of that society to understand itself, to look at itself dispassionately and to take steps to correct what is wrong.[16] Awareness also means facing the truth. Yet, as Vaclav Havel has put it, "The role accorded to culture in the consumer philosophy is not to excite people with the truth but to reassure them with lies".[17] Thus education is against the consumer philosophy — whether in Czechoslovakia or South Africa.

Education is also about culture. Culture is a very difficult thing to define and I do not propose to try, but all the great educationalists keep coming back to the whole question of culture in society. Matthew Arnold argued that culture is primarily about values. "There is," he wrote, "of culture another view, in which not solely the scientific passion, the sheer desire to see things as they are, natural and proper in an intelligent being, appears as the ground of it. There is a view in which all the love of our neighbour, the impulses towards action, help, and beneficence, the desire for removing human error, clearing human confusion, and diminishing human misery, the noble aspiration to leave the world better and happier than we found it — motives eminently such as are called social — come in as part of the grounds of culture, and the main and pre-eminent part. Culture is then properly described not as having its origin in curiosity, but as having its origin in the love of perfection; it is 'a study of perfection'."[18] Culture is about "sweetness and light". Culture has values and takes a stand. It is opposed both to "fierceness" and to addiction to an abstract system, which two things Matthew Arnolds identifies as "the signal marks of Jacobinism".[19] There are other swear words in our time.

Vaclav Havel argues that culture is the main instrument of society's self knowledge, he writes of the necessity for freedom in "A world where 'truth' flourishes not in a dialectic climate of general knowledge but in a climate of power motives in a world of mental sterility, petrified dogmas, rigid and unchangeable creeds, leading inevitably to creedless despotism. This is a world of prohibitions and limitations and of orders, a world where cultural policy means primarily the operations of a cultural police force." This leads to the sterility where there is no culture and, says Havel, no history. Tied up with this question of freedom is the impact of censorship in a society where even one tiny journal is banned. "The forcible liquidation of such a journal — a theoretical re-

view concerned with the theatre, say — is not just a particular impoverishment of its particular readers. It is not even merely a severe blow to theatrical culture. It is simultaneously and above all the liquidation of a particular organ of society's self-awareness and, hence, an interference, hard to describe in exact terms ,in the complex system of circulation, exchange and conversion of nutrients that maintain life in the many-layered organism which is society today: a blow against the natural dynamic of the process as going on within that organism: a disturbance of the balanced interplay of all its various functions, an interplay reflecting the level of complexity reached by society's anatomy. And just as a chronic deficiency of a given vitamin (amounting in quantitative terms only to a negligible fraction of the human diet) just as such a chronic deficiency can make a man ill so, in the long run, the loss of a single periodical can cause the social organism much greater damage than would appear at first sight. And what if the loss involves not just one periodical, but virtually all?"[20]

Education then is about culture. It is also about manhood rather than manpower;[21] womanhood rather than woman power. Education does not exist simply to provide tomorrow's labour force. There is — and I think it is important that an economist should say this — there is more to education than human capital. Why? First of all simply because there is. But also because in a world of rapid change it is more efficient to have trainable people than people stuffed up with outdated facts and static knowledge. What is intelligence? Again Piaget replies; it is the capacity to adapt to new situations. More than fifty years ago a government commission on the teaching of English stressed that education is not about information but guidance in the acquisition of experience.[22] As educationalists we are not simply concerned, as Paulo Freire puts it, with "filling up a bank with a whole lot of statistics". We are concerned not with banking but with assimilation. Piaget, when asked to define assimilation, used the lovely image of a rabbit eating a lettuce. "It is very simple, an organism feeds itself in absorbing substances, transforming these substances and giving them its own structure. A rabbit eating a lettuce does not become a lettuce, he transforms the lettuce into rabbit. In the same way knowledge is not at all a replica but an integration into a structure. That's assimilation".[23] Education is not about putting a lettuce into that rabbit and waiting to take it out at some later date.

Education is also about zest and freshness. A N Whitehead maintained that the ultimate basis of intellectual life is first-hand knowledge. The secondhandedness of the learned world, he said, is the secret of its mediocrity. It is tame because it has never been scared by facts.[24] To what extent in our society are we protecting ourselves from facts because they are too frightening to think about? Education, Paulo Freire reminds us, is not the business of transferring knowledge, it is the act of knowing. Everett Reimer writes of the importance of personal relationships. Unless a person has good relationships with other human beings that person can neither educate himself nor be educated by others. People can not be told about things:— they must experience them for themselves. One does not know London simply by reading about it: one has to go to London and walk down the Charing Cross Road. Then one begins to understand the place in a way that no reading can possibly convey.

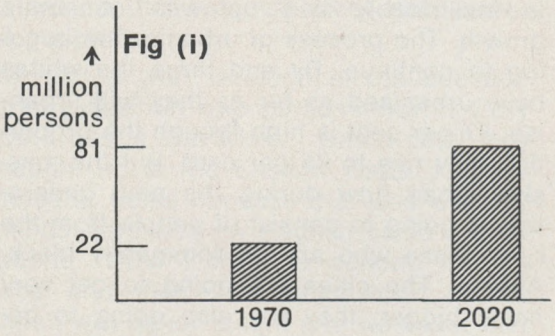
Finally, no definition of education can avoid pointing out that it is political. It is not party political, but it is involved with society and it is not neutral. Certainly people try to use it for various of their political ends. Many of those in authority like to use it to maintain the **status quo** because the **status quo** is comfortable if one is on top. They want to keep the great machine running smoothly. Education either reinforces what exists or transforms it. Either way it is political. To pretend that education is not political is simply naïve. It also serves, by default, to reinforce the system as it exists. In his writings about education Paulo Freire has defined conscientisation as the process of becoming critically aware

of one's reality combined with a realisation that one can act effectively to change it. Seen in this light education must be profoundly political.

It is time now to turn to look, albeit cursorily, at society within which we shall be concerned with education during our lives. The first, most important, fact is that the world is now a global village as was seen so clearly when the astronauts went to the moon and took photographs from space of the world which locked like a tiny "cats-eye" coloured marble. And we are all on it. The enormous change in communication can be seen in the experience of my mother who, as a child, travelled through the Eastern Cape by ox-waggon. Now she, like thousands of others, flies round the country by Boeing — though not yet by Concorde. So that one has that enormous change in communication. Instead of one's radius of effective communication being 20 miles one can fly a thousand miles from Cape Town to Johannnesburg for a meeting. There is a similar change in the communication of words and pictures. Two generations ago children heard grandfather tell stories round the fireside. Today they watch television bounced off satellites, from other continents. In South Africa during the 1960s small radios spread into all the isolated farms so that people who had never been to school, who for generations had been isolated even from the main stream of rural African society in the Transkei, Ciskei, Kwa Zulu and elsewhere have now, through radio, been linked up not only with the whole of South Africa but with the world.

There also has been the enormous growth — and continued growth it would seem — of technological power which gives us more freedom and hence more choices. Because we can split the atom we can either make nuclear bombs or power stations. How do we choose what we are going to do and what does the educational system do to help prepare people to make the right choices?

Looking now at South Africa over the next generation during which period you will be teaching, the population of South Africa will grow from 22 million to 81 million persons[25] (between now and the year 2020). There is going to be a need for jobs and a need for trainability and adaptability to fit these jobs. We are going to be living in a very different world in the year 2020. To what extent are the children who grow up, having spent a thousand hours in one year of their life in your hands, going to be prepared for the society in which they will live as adults? These are also ways of looking at people about which we should be aware.

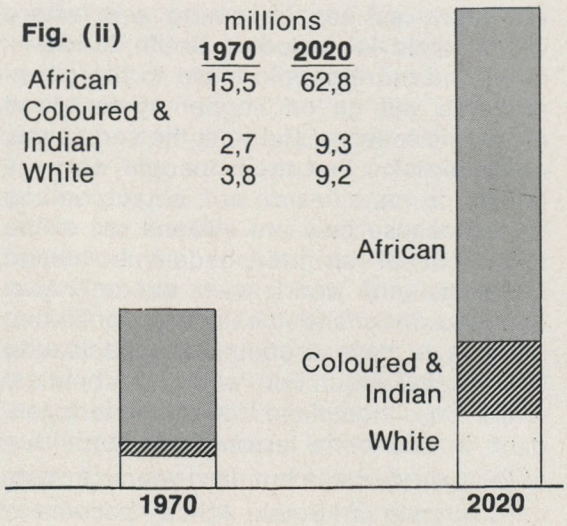


The figures show some idea of the change. That, of course, is the picture that comes from looking at people as people and seeing that the humanity which binds us together is far more important than minor things like skin colour which divide us. But if we insist, as we do at the moment, on looking at people in terms of skin colour we are going to have a somewhat different vision of the future.

Fig. (ii)

millions

	1970	2020
African	15,5	62,8
Coloured & Indian	2,7	9,3
White	3,8	9,2



From the above diagram one begins to to see how the way in which we look at people is going to influence profoundly the way in which we think about and prepare for the future. There is a whole process of urbanisation. In 1904, 53 per cent of white South Africans lived in the cities; in 1970, 87 per cent lived in the cities. As far as Africans are concerned in 1904 the proportion urbanised was 10 per cent and in 1970 it was 33 per cent: one third of black South Africa lived in the cities. This is an irreversible phenomenon which is inextricably tied up with economic growth. The process of urbanisation is going to continue. By and large the whites have urbanised as far as they will urbanise; 87 per cent is high though the proportion may rise to 95 per cent. But the massive urban flow during the next generation is going to consist of people from the rural areas who are predominantly black, African. The cities are going to get very much bigger; they are also going to become blacker in the sense that there is going to be a higher proportion of African people living there. Again we have to decide how we are going to look at the future. Are we going to look at it as racists or are we going to look at it in terms of human beings?

In this context we need to be aware of the dynamics of the migrant labour system because it is tied up with the process of urbanisation. If on the one hand one decides to pursue economic growth then, inevitably, as has happened everywhere in the world — including South Africa — more and more people move to the cities. And this will go on happening for good economic reasons. But if, at the same time, one maintains that those people who are moving to the cities do not, in fact, belong there because they are citizens not of the cities but of an independent homeland some distance apart, then the only way one can reconcile these two conflicting goals is to have a compulsory oscillating migrant system. For whilst in political terms the "homeland" may be independent; in economic terms it has, by virtue of the nature of one hundred years of economic growth in South Africa, become a rural backwater. Thus, during the 1960s, we have seen a massive expansion of the migrant labour system from the mining industry into the manufacturing sector.[26] Today at least half, perhaps even more[27] of black South African men working in the cities are living there in hostels on a single basis. I fear for the future of our land if that future is to contain Langa and Alexandra multiplied many times.

Looking at income distribution for a moment, we see that in 1970/71 whites made up 18 per cent of the population but spent approximately 74 per cent of the private consumption expenditure. Africans on the other hand made up 70 per cent of the population but spent only 19 per cent of the private expenditure.[28] There are individual exceptions but in general terms the whites are rich, the black are poor.

In terms of language there are in this country approximately four million people speaking Zulu, four million speaking Xhosa, four million speaking Afrikaans — some of them white some of them brown — and about one and a half million speaking English as home languages, one and a half speaking Sotho and one and a half speaking Tswana. There is indeed diversity of language.

Finally as regards our society we should take note of some of the basic statistics pertaining to education. In the past generation there has been a big increase in the number of Africans at school. In 1935 five per cent of the black population were enrolled. By 1955 the proportion had doubled to 10 per cent and over the next 20 years it had doubled again to 20 per cent by 1974. Similarly there has, particularly in more recent years ,been a substantial increase in expenditure on black education. Nevertheless in terms of expenditure per pupil in 1972 the figure for Africans was approximately R19 whilst for whites it was R313. Thus the ratio of white to black expenditure per pupil was just over 16:1, an enormous gap.[29] Another measure of the difference in the quality of education for white and black school children is the pupil to teacher ratio. In the white schools there are an average of 20 pupils to every teacher;[30] in the African schools the aver-

age is 57. One of the major problems with which African teachers are trying to get to grips is how to teach these enormous classes. But for blacks there are also the difficulties of double sessions in terms of which young children between Sub A and Std 2 go to school for the first half of the morning until another group arrives for the second half. Almost half (46 per cent) of the African pupils at lower primary school are in double session. Another measure of the difference is provided by the statistics on fall-out. For every hundred who started Sub A in 1962, 76 reached Sub B; in Std I the number had fallen to 68; in form 2 (approximately Std 8) it had fallen to 10; and in form 5 (the last year of school) it had fallen to 1,6. Thus for every hundred people entering school, only two got right to the end. As far as whites are concerned, for every hundred who started in 1962, 89 were still at school in standard eight, in 1971. In general white children are getting far longer education. In terms of education stocks, in 1970, of the white population that was older than four years of age the proportion with no education at all was 16 per cent; for Africans the comparative figure was 66,5 per cent. Of the population older than 16, 35 per cent of the whites had matric but only 0,5 per cent of the Africans. Are we then preparing ourselves adequately for the future?

So far we have examined the nature of education and have sought a glimpse of the society into which we are moving. Our task now is to bring these two aspects together to ask ourselves what type of education, what sort of vehicle, we are wanting to build? I would stress that I offer no blueprint; simply a few preliminary thoughts; some lettuce leaves, if you wish, for each of you, like Piaget's rabbit, to chew on and assimilate in your own way. I hope it makes you a better rabbit. The first leaf concerns the matter of isolation. We know so little of each other, either intellectually or in terms of our experience, our backgrounds, the schools we went to, the language we speak, and so on. We know more, I would suggest, about London than we know about Soweto. To be educated in our generation people must meet each other. Yet we still live in a society where not only is this still not encouraged, it is actively discouraged if not prohibited. There is surely nothing more irresponsible, nothing more destructive for the future, nothing more dangerous for our children and our grandchildren, that they should be brought up and educated in isolation from each other, never having met each other as human beings with interests, with fears, and with hopes. If there is one priority in South Africa at the moment is it not that we should fight, fight and fight again to ensure that we may meet each other as people?

Connected with isolation is the question of language. My own personal horror story about this is that when I was a small boy brought up in the Eastern Cape, I spoke Xhosa at home because that was who my friends were and my English came a poor second. Then I went to school, first in Alice and then in Grahamstown where Xhosa was never taught and we never met Xhosa-speaking boys. From the age of nine or 10 I was taught Latin because, as you know, the structure of Latin is wonderful. The net result of my education was that when I emerged from school most of the Xhosa that I had learnt I had forgotten whereas I had been drilled, and redrilled, in Latin yet I still cannot manage to read the tomb stones in European cathedrals. For a child growing up in South Africa this is mis-education of the profoundest sort. Instead of building on what was there, on what was needed for the future, I was stripped of all of that and left with nothing. I would argue that at least three, possibly four, languages in our schools ought to be compulsory; English, Afrikaans, Xhosa or Zulu and Tswana or Sotho. With four languages one can begin to move around our country meaningfully. It is salutary to remember that many black South Africans speak at least four languages as a matter of course. South Africans, especially whites, have simply got to get to work on languages. They ought to be compulsory and, of course, they ought also to be taught by people whose home language it is. We must not teach language at second hand. We train white students to

teach an African language because we are scared to put African teachers into white schools lest they develop personal relationships with the pupils or with other teachers thus opening the way to a questioning of all kinds of sacred systems.

The second lettuce leaf is wrapped around the question of authoritarianism and centralisation. Amongst those calling for the de-schooling of society are many who want to abolish all schools which they believe are irredeemably authoritarian and destructive of individuals. But there are some de-schoolers who argue that the attack is against the idea of schooling rather than against places of education where children learn. The essence of what creative educators are saying today is "Do not impose yourself upon the child. Let him develop his own way." Following Lowenfeld and Brittain one thinks of getting a child simply to sit on a swing and feel his hands and feel where he is sitting and then letting him go and draw it rather than giving him a colouring-in book and saying, "Look, there is a picture of a child on a swing. Colour it in. Do it our way", thus imposing upon the child rather than drawing upon his experience. Similarly Herbert Kohl moved away from a disastrous attempt at schooling his 36 children to letting them express their problems, write their essays, and tell him what life was like in their Harlem ghetto.[31] But it is not only within the individual classroom or school that authoritarianism cripples creative development. Within the wider educational system there is need (and there must be battle) for far more independence for schools and colleges. One has got to resist bureaucratisation, centralisation of power, and authoritarianism because it all leads not to efficiency but to a hardening of the arteries, to social sclerosis. We must fight for the independence of our educational institutions because we are people, not sheep.

Within society as a whole we also have to fight to be people, to be men and women. For example we should not simply accept the authoritarian assumption that we may only see a certain type of controlled television and that if we do not like it we must lump it. In this view anybody who has some bright ideas about setting up an alternative programme may not do so. But why not? We must demand too to be able to read what our fellow citizens are writing; citizens of South Africa, citizens of the world. There is a man-made literary famine caused by censorship-drought in this country which deprives us of much that we should know about. This starves our roots and diminishes us as people, turning us into cogs ,into puppets. We can choose to be that if we wish, but do we?

The third leaf on which to chew concerns our history and the problem of ethnocentrism about which people are becoming increasingly aware. Have you, for example, ever considered how history text books in France and Britain might differ in their description and analysis of the battle of Waterloo? Recently there has been published in Paris a book analysing the astonishing bias in the way in which Africa, India, America and Asia is viewed by historians writing text-books for schools in France, Britain, Germany, Russia and other western countries.[32] We in South Africa need to ask ourselves similarly penetrating questions. Looking back into the 19th century, for example, what are the cathartic experiences that we whites generally think of as event of major significance? Two that would be found at the top of most lists would be the Great Trek and the mineral discoveries. Yet if one were to ask a black South African to identify the major events in South Africa during the 19th century, he would probably list the hundred years war and the dispossession of his people's land. Without awareness of these different perspectives, there can be no understanding. Which brings us back to the question of censorship. White South Africans are not allowed to know the black experience; almost all books by modern black South African writers are banned. Yet we have to wrestle against ethno-centrism in the history we teach. As teachers we must listen and learn. This may often be painful but if we value truth it is essential that we begin to exchange insights gained from our different perspectives.

The fourth leaf to chew over concerns the question of ethics. If I may turn theological for a moment, speaking from Anglican experience, about religious education around the world, it seems that by and large we are bringing up theological illiterates. In the world in which we are moving there are enormous ethical problems; think only of medical engineering. Yet people do not know how to think about these issues: they do not learn from church; they do not learn from the schools. What kind of ethical base do we have on which to make decisions? How are you going to help children think through the moral issues that will face them in society? One of the things we must avoid is thinking that these problems are the kind of things that children do not understand and from which they ought to be protected. Capital punishment, for example, is a sordid thing and we are tempted not to discuss it with children. But if we do not, when will they ever learn? It is in primary schools that children get most of their education. I remember Sir Robert Birley saying that one of the most educative experiences of his life was driving around with his grandmother at the age of five or six having a long discussion with her about the pros and cons of the infallibility of the Pope! Obviously one must protect children in the sense of bringing them up in security and love. But, equally, one must not so cocoon them that when they go inside the outside world they simply fall over because they have none of the moral roots that grow from thinking through the difficult ethical issues of our time.

Closely connected with this is the question of guidance for our children through all the educative experience they will undergo outside school, not least in front of the television screen. How can we help them assimilate that experience as meaningful education rather than brainwashing or whatever else it may be?

The sixth and last lettuce leaf arises from the statistics on education for different race groups in South Africa. How will we, teaching privileged children in privileged schools first, help these children (and ourselves) get a wider experience and secondly help other schools struggling with no resources and pupil:teacher ratios of 60:1? Can we make our schools resource centres for other teachers; to help them recycle and to charge up their batteries again? How can we learn to share all that we have more effectively with the wider community?

All this of course sounds very fine, but you may well ask, how exactly is one to do anything about these things? They are all so difficult. This is true and yet one has to buckle down and see what one can do about them. First and foremost one must not despair. It is so easy to give up after the first flush of enthusiasm has worn off but one must persevere and "keep on keeping on". Also when things seem insuperably difficult it is comforting to remember Paulo Freire's remark that "in history one must do what is historically possible."[33] Even if one cannot set the Thames on fire the little things that can be done are nevertheless very important. For what is really needed in this country is imaginative action. Nobody else can tell you what to do but, with insight, you will find cracks within the granite where you can operate creatively. Then too we should remember your role as parents. Most of you will be having children and your training as teachers should not be thought of simply for the purposes of class-room work. Think about what you can do as parents to teach not only your own children but all their friends who dart in and out of your house. My wife bought our family cuisenaire rods long before I had ever heard of them and they have lain in our living room for the last two years being used every day by children of all ages. Indeed if you remember nothing else of this talk today it will have been worth while if instead of coffee-table books on the coffee table in your homes you have a set of cuisenaire rods with which people can play and gradually learn mathematics, through their own experience.

I have gone on far too long. Teachers these days tend to be regarded as having rather low status yet they are surely amongst the most important people in any

society. You are entering a marvellous profession, particularly as **primary** school teachers. You are not merely transmitters of the past, important though this is, you are preparers of the future and your responsibility is not to bureaucrats, nor to parents, nor even to a system. Your responsibility is to the children who pass through your hands. Do not betray them. Returning to our parable of the Rolls Royce, help your pupils to grow up as men and women who say "yes" creatively to life rather than bleating pitifully in their luxury glass boxes as they roll along. If you wish to dedicate your lives to the sort of teaching where you are bringing up people to be independent creators then I would ask you to stand up now to say with me the Act of Dedication and so commit yourselves to this lifelong task.

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28. S F Archer, "South African Population, Income Shares and Ratios by Race", in **Power, Privilege and Poverty** (Sprocas, 1972), p 116.
29. This figure (and those that follow) is taken from tables, not yet published, compiled by Delia Hendrie at the University of Cape Town.
30. In practice a class will contain more than the statistical average which is calculated on the assumption that all teachers are teaching every single period through the day.
31. Herbert Kohl, **Thirty-six Children** (Penguin, 1972).
32. Roy Preiswerk and Dominique Perrot, **Ethnocentrisme et Histoire** (Anthropos, Paris, 1975).
33. **Risk,** Vol. 11, No. 1, 1975.