

**Address at the Farewell to Mr. David Wylde,
Headmaster of St Andrews College, Grahamstown**

18 October 2008

It is a great pleasure to represent Rhodes University and say a few words at Mr. Wylde's farewell, in part because of the historical relationship between St. Andrew's College and Rhodes, but more so because of the impression that Mr. Wylde has made on me on the occasions that we have had an opportunity to converse.

In the two years I have been at Rhodes and in Grahamstown, my responsibilities and those of Mr Wylde's have meant that we have been unable to spend any quality time together to talk about education and other issues. This is all the pity, for from the little contact that we have had I believe that we have a common passion for education and share a similar philosophy.

Last March, walking along one of the wide Manhattan, New York, avenues to attend a meeting at the Ford Foundation, my eyes fell upon a sign on a board within a church yard.

The sign read: "Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire". The quote is, of course, from William Butler Yeats, the great Irish poet, writer, dramatist and the 1923 winner of the Nobel Prize for literature.

That these words were on a sign in a church yard is significant, for sometimes religious institutions have a 'pail' conception of education, rather than the idea of education as the cultivation of the desire for true learning and the lighting of the intellects of people.

The idea of education as "the lighting of a fire" is one that I am certain Mr Wylde would warmly embrace.

Of course, we have to be all too alive to the unfortunate reality that sometimes masquerading as 'education' is indoctrination fed by the worst values and chauvinism.

In many different parts of the world, indoctrination masquerading as education lights fires of the kind that must be cause for great concern. These fires often have their source in religious and cultural fundamentalism – whether this is Islamic fundamentalism, Christian, Jewish or Hindu fundamentalism. These are fires that rather than illuminating us consume and extinguish and envelope us in darkness.

These are not gentle flames of compassion and the oneness of humanity that you hope would be associated with religion and education, but incendiary flames of intolerance and hatred that devastate, injure, maim and destroy innocent lives.

These are also not flames of any deep spiritual nature, but the very antithesis of any spirituality and humanity. The flames of fundamentalism, nurtured by indoctrination disguised as education, do nothing to advance human dignity, rights and social justice or economic and social opportunities for all.

The fire that education has to light must, Mr. Wylde will agree, have some core features.

For one, it cannot be satisfied with merely imparting technical and vocational skills – today's fashionable so-called solution to all the problems of education and society.

For another, education is also about much more than simply preparing learners and students for the labour-market and the economy and contributing to economic growth.

Crude instrumental approaches to education that reduce its value to the production of skills and its efficacy for economic growth denude education of its considerably wider social value and functions.

Education has an intrinsic significance as an engagement and partnership between dedicated teachers and students around humanity's intellectual, cultural and scientific inheritances in the form of books, art, pictures, music and artefacts, and around our historical and contemporary understandings, views and beliefs regarding our natural and social worlds.

Education is the pursuit of learning which is undertaken as part of what it means to be human (Oakeshott in Fuller, T. ed., 1989).

Education is also intimately connected to the idea of democratic citizenship, and to the cultivation of humanity (Nussbaum, 2006).

Finally, education has profound value for the promotion of health and well-being, the assertion and pursuit of social and human rights and active democratic participation.

To draw on Yeats again it is “empty souls (that) tend toward extreme opinions”. ‘Empty souls’ are produced when our education is stripped of values and the quest for knowledge and understanding, and reduced to skills and the pursuit of economic growth alone.

Yeats also writes that “happiness is neither virtue nor pleasure nor this thing nor that but simply growth. We are happy when we are growing”. In large part, we grow through learning and education.

It is said that ‘you are who you are’. That’s not quite true. You are who you *learn* to become. As headmasters, vice-chancellors, teachers and academics, we must take responsibility for supporting learners and students not only to learn, but also to learn to become. And, as Mahtma Ghandi has famously said, the starting point is that as educators: “*We must become the change we want to see*”.

If our goals are educational and social transformation and human development, we must refuse ideas of education that view it in purely instrumental terms. Instead, we are bound to protect and promote a much richer and multi-faceted conception of education that views it as also having intrinsic as well as social and political value.

Mr. Wylde’s passion for education, his colleagues testify, is based on these very understandings, and it these that have

underpinned and animated his outstanding service to St. Andrews and its successive cohorts of students.

Fourteen years into our democracy we must be concerned about the state of public schooling and education in South Africa.

Despite almost universal formal participation in schooling, our schools continue to evince significant problems related to quality, drop outs, retention, progression and successful completion.

'The simple reality is that enrolment is not the same as attendance and attendance does not imply learning' (Sayed, 2007:8). South African school students perform extremely poorly on a range of international assessment tests, in terms of which '65% of school leavers...are functionally illiterate' (Sayed, 2007:6).

Currently the independent and ex-Model C schools which make up only 10% of our some 7 000 secondary schools produce 60% of all university entrance passes. Another 10% of the historically black schools produce a further 10% of all university entrance passes. Thus, while 20% of secondary schools produce 80% of university entrance passes, the remaining 80% of secondary schools produce only 20%.

The fundamental challenge is, clearly, to improve the quality of education in schools. To be sure, resources for equitable access for poor students, targeted nutrition programmes, facilities and equipment and the adequate remuneration of educators are important, but they are not a sufficient condition for effective schooling and education. There are also a number of other key necessary conditions.

One is an institutional culture of effective learning and teaching. A second key condition is 'qualified, motivated, and committed teachers', who are 'the single most important determinant of effective learning' (Sayed, 2007:7). A third key element is purposeful and effective educational leadership and management on the part of school heads.

Mr. Wylde, to his great credit, has imaginatively and diligently exercised the leadership necessary to ensure a culture of effective learning and teaching and motivated and committed teachers.

As important, this has been a leadership grounded in values, sound educational principles, a deep understanding of the social purposes and goals of education, and an understanding that knowledge and education matter!

A leadership alive to context; a leadership based on an awareness of the possibility of happiness through learning and education.

A leadership that personifies the Ghandi adage that "We must become the change we want to see".

If we are honest, ours is a context where effective leadership and management and motivated and committed teachers are all too lacking in thousands of schools across the length and breadth of our land.

Yet, with an awareness of context, Mr. Wylde will be the first to acknowledge that it is much easier in some situations than in others to exercise leadership and be a motivated and committed teacher.

He will also, with a generosity of spirit, be the first to remind us that we should be cautious to tar all heads and teachers. That there are, equally, in thousands of schools unsung heroes and heroines, committed and motivated heads and teachers, who under often difficult conditions give their all to realize the potential and talents of learners.

And so, as we joyfully celebrate Mr. Wylde's outstanding contribution and years of selfless and distinguished service to the education of our children and youth, let us also pay tribute to all the educators who understand the meaning of education and the responsibilities attached to educating, and toil daily in the service of education and humanity.

I am reliably advised that among Mr. Wylde's favourite phrases are those from *The True Glory* that read:

There must be a beginning, a beginning of any great matter
But the continuing unto the end until it be thoroughly finished
Yields the true glory.

The line "continuing unto the end until it be thoroughly finished" is one that captures wonderfully one of Mr. Wylde's many qualities and it should not be surprising if it has also inspired and animated his life.

As you leave St. Andrews College and make a new 'beginning' in Mpumulanga around another 'great matter', we wish you well and know that you will continue with this 'great matter' "unto the end until it be thoroughly finished".

In your honour, sir, allow me to conclude with a poem by the great Bengali educator, novelist and poet, Rabindranath Tagore. The poem is from *Gitanjali* and is titled *Mind without Fear*. I have a hunch that you will appreciate the words.

Mind without Fear

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high
Where knowledge is free
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments
by narrow domestic walls
Where words come out from the depth of truth
Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards
perfection
Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into
the dreary desert sand of dead habit
Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever-widening
thought and action
Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country
awake.