

OPENING OF FACULTY OF EDUCATION PHD WEEK ON ADVANCED EDUCATIONAL THEORY AND PRACTICE

23 October 2006

Good morning, molweni; and to those of you from afar a very warm welcome to Rhodes University, to Rhini/Grahamstown, to the Makana District, and the Eastern Cape

It is a pleasure to welcome you to this Faculty of Education PhD Week on *Advanced Educational Theory and Practice*. I trust that that you will find the week stimulating and also find us convivial hosts.

The premier of the Western Cape Ebrahim Rasool recently related a story that is a useful introduction to the week that you are beginning.

Story of lost keys searched for under a street light

I don't know what proportion of time you spend in the light or in the dark. But as universities and scientific disciplines and fields, as scholars and graduate students, it is important that in general we focus not on the brightly lit areas but on those areas that are dimly lit and in darkness as part of our role of advancing knowledge and human understanding of our natural and social worlds.

Nonetheless, it is the case that sometimes the supposedly lit areas need to be revisited because previous research and writing have tended to shed more heat than light.

One of the areas that perhaps has shed more heat than light is that of quality and equity and is therefore appropriate that the focus of this week is on 'the relationship between educational quality, efficiency and equity'. As the organisers of the PhD week note, 'this is not a new topic in South or southern Africa' and the aim is to 'critically deliberate' on this 'important issue...so that we can deepen our knowledge'.

The theme of the PhD week is *Advanced Educational Theory and Practice*. I am old-fashioned in that I take theory very seriously and am also of the view that theoretical practice is a necessary condition for concrete practice and that little is so practical as good theory.

My own engagements with educational quality, efficiency and equity are confined to higher education rather than schooling, about which I know little. I wish to draw on these engagements to make a few observations.

1. First, quality, efficiency and equity are, of course, pertinent not only to the domain of learning and teaching but also to other domains of education, such as governance and employment.
2. Second, it is vital to make a distinction between equality and equity – equality refers to 'sameness', whereas equity refers to fair and just treatment.
3. Third, for much of its history progressive politics in South Africa has advanced a *politics of equal recognition*, whether in relation to 'race', gender, ethnicity or

disability. With the advent of democracy this politics of equal recognition has necessarily translated into a Constitution and Bill of Rights that seeks to guarantee equality in various spheres of society.

Nonetheless, a politics of equal recognition cannot be blind to the effects of the legacies of colonialism and apartheid. Nor can it blithely proceed from a notion that the advent of democracy is in itself a sufficient condition for the erasure and elimination of the structural conditions, policies and practices that have for decades grounded and sustained inequalities in all domains of our social life.

It is precisely this recognition that gives salience to the idea of redress, and treats it as a social imperative, and makes it a fundamental dimension of educational transformation and social transformation in general.

4. Fourth, it is the concept of equity – understood as fair and just treatment, rather than equality ('sameness') - which grounds the idea and practice of redress.
5. Fifth, in education redress means institutions providing opportunities for access, advancement, and success to historically *and* socially disadvantaged groups, whether these are students, teachers or administrators. Given our legacy, redress will remain a pressing imperative for many years to come.
6. Finally, the conventional wisdom appears to be that policies and strategies of redress must necessarily result in the reduction of the quality of provision, qualifications and graduates. There may be an intractable tension between the simultaneous pursuit of redress and quality, but there is no inevitable conflict between quality and redress. Enhancing redress does not mean an automatic diminution of quality and the compromise of standards, appropriately defined.

'Quality' and 'standards' are not timeless and invariant but historically specific and must be related to the objectives of institutions and to educational and broader social purposes. It is unwise and inappropriate to conceive of quality as being attached to a single, supposedly universal model of an educational institution. Thus, for example, a differentiated higher education system in which institutions have different objectives and which caters for different social and educational purposes will necessarily have a variety of standards which are appropriate to specified objectives and purposes.

It *is* possible to pursue redress with quality, and quality with redress. Without quality, redress is meaningless. So-called quality to the exclusion of redress means that we preclude the possibility of social advancement through education, that we reproduce the occupational and social structure of our apartheid past, and we compromise the substance of our democracy.

I would have liked to say something about efficiency and equity, and efficiency and quality but time unfortunately does not permit.

Instead, let me close with just one further observation.

To the extent that one seeks to pursue both redress *and* quality *simultaneously*, this establishes difficult political and social dilemmas and choices and decisions, and raises the question of trade-offs between principles, goals and strategies.

An exclusive concentration on redress can lead to the privileging of redress at the expense of quality, which could result in the goal of producing high quality graduates being compromised. Conversely, an exclusive focus on quality and 'standards' can result in redress being retarded or delayed, with no or limited erosion of the inequitable racial and gender character of the high-level occupational structure and the social structure.

It is clear that no institution can escape the paradoxes and intractable tensions of our social milieu but must boldly confront and creatively mediate these paradoxes and intractable tensions.

The need for institutions to pursue a number of goals and strategies that are in tension with one another *simultaneously* means having to confront difficult social dilemmas and having to make unenviable choices and decisions. It also means that there can be great difficulties in establishing priorities and in prioritising.

When confronted with an intractable tension between dearly held goals and values - such as redress and quality, or social equity and institutional equity - various 'simplifying manoeuvres' are possible (Morrow, 1997). In the particular conditions of contemporary South Africa, these simplifying manoeuvres are not wholly open to us. An alternate path is to accept that for good political and social reasons, goals and strategies that may be in tension may have to be pursued simultaneously. Paradoxes must be creatively addressed and policies and strategies devised that can satisfy multiple imperatives, can *balance* competing goals, and can enable the pursuit of equally desirable goals.

Trade-off's are inevitable. They should be made deliberately with respect to their implications for vision and goals, and made consciously and transparently. The trade-offs and choices that are made should also be communicated in ways that build understanding and secure support from important constituencies.

In closing I wish you a stimulating and productive PhD week and an enjoyable stay at Rhodes and in Rhini/Grahamstown.