

# **Networking English Teachers' Conference**

**Eden Grove, Rhodes University**

**10 April 2010**

Teachers of English from Eastern Cape schools, colleagues from the Institute for the Study of English in Africa, conference participants, presenters, ladies and gentlemen – Molweni, good morning.

It is a great pleasure to welcome you to Rhodes University, to iRhini/Grahamstown, and to the Networking English Teachers' Conference.

I wish to extend my sincere appreciation to you for your commitment in attending this conference. I recognise that you are sacrificing some of your holidays to attend this conference and that are also other costs entailed in being here.

Still, these and other sacrifices are necessary if we are to remake our schools and improve the quality of schooling and education, and if we are to realize the potential and talents of our children and youth in general and their performance in English in particular.

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

It has been noted that '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 10% of our some 7 000 secondary schools – the independent and Model C schools - produce 60% of all National Senior Certificate passes for university entrance.

Another 10% of the historically black schools, which include the Department of Education's Dinaledi schools, produce a further 20% 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% of such passes.

It is clear that a fundamental challenge is to improve the quality of education and of schools.

To be sure, resources for equity of access for poor students, targeted nutrition programmes, facilities, toilets and the adequate remuneration of educators are all important.

However, all these are not in themselves sufficient to ensure effective schooling and education.

There are also a number of other conditions that are necessary.

One is to ensure that there exists a culture of effective learning and teaching and to move purposefully to restore this culture where it is absent in schools.

A key element here is effective educational leadership and management on the part of a range of actors that include the Ministry of Education, provincial ministries and especially district offices and school heads.

Indeed, it is argued that a key distinguishing feature between the 20% of historically black schools that produce 80% of all university entrance passes and the other 80% of public secondary schools that produce only 20% is effective leadership and management.

A second condition is 'qualified, motivated, and committed teachers', who are 'the single most important determinant of effective learning' (Sayed, 2007: 7).

A third is the availability of high quality learning material and textbooks.

It is argued that '(e)ffective assessment is (also) at the heart of ensuring that learning is effective', and that '(d)eveloping robust monitoring and assessment systems to monitor student performance is key to improving learning' (ibid.).

Finally, it is suggested that 'the more schools are held to be accountable the more effective they are', which raises the importance of effective school governing bodies.

If these are the conditions that are critical for effective education and schooling, then our task is to ensure that these conditions are in place, both generally, and specifically in the various subject areas.

Otherwise, we will continue to deny new generations of our children and youth their constitutional and social rights and ultimately also their dignity.

Without doubt, we continue to suffer from an apartheid legacy that is a great obstacle to our efforts to remake our schools.

‘To give birth to the new, we must be angry at our past’. However, a wonderful Sotho proverb says: ‘No matter how hot your anger may be, it cannot cook’.

Our challenge is to ‘make the real fire that cooks’, both with respect to developing the capacities of our schools in general and enhancing and supporting the capabilities of English teachers in particular.

Developing the capabilities of English teachers and, in turn, improving the competencies of students in English are both vital conditions for improving the performance of students in other subjects, such as maths and science.

It is near well impossible for our students to master concepts in maths and science and other subjects without adequate competencies in English.

This networking conference is an opportunity for debate and discussion, for sharing ideas and understandings, for mutual learning and for devising the means to support each other in a variety of ways.

At the first conference in 2008, I indicated that I hoped that that conference would lay the basis both for an ongoing partnership between Rhodes and English teachers and for the emergence of some kind of institutional arrangement to take work forward.



I am greatly thrilled that on Sunday, only some two years after the 2008 conference, you will launch the Eastern Cape English Educator's Association.

I warmly congratulate you on this initiative and I wish you strength and good progress on this important initiative.

We displayed great imagination, creativity, commitment, perseverance, courage and especially collective endeavour to win our democracy and to set us on a new path.

We must draw on these qualities again to change current realities in our schools, classrooms and in English teaching.

I hope that you will enjoy a stimulating and productive conference, and that you will generate insights and ideas that will both advance the teaching of English in our schools, and also the Eastern Cape English Educator's Association.

I also hope that you will have a very pleasant and enjoyable stay at Rhodes.

Thank you.