

SOMERSET HOUSE PREP PARENTS
10 JUNE 2009

Great pleasure to be back in the Somerset House environment. Thank you etc.

Also a pleasure to be addressing parents – parenthood is such a vulnerable time in one's life. *My husband and I are either going to buy a dog or have a child. We can't decide whether to ruin our carpet or ruin our lives!* (Rita Rudner)

I have been asked to talk about quality education in SA, and perhaps a little about how one can judge it. As Chris says I have been into literally hundreds of schools as a teacher, a teacher educator and as a quality assurer. My ideas of what constitutes a good educational experience for our children have been built up over many years in all three of those roles, as well as in the role of parent and grandparent.

As a twenty year old beginning teacher on the copper belt in Zambia in the sixties I knew all about education. What I mostly knew was that teaching was all about the teacher and I am sure that I was revoltingly cocky. A good number of years in several primary schools in Britain, Zimbabwe and South Africa grew some sense in me and I began to realize that being a good teacher wasn't enough, it wasn't about me the teacher at all – there must be something else. My next stage was teacher education which is a whole different ball-game and which quite often seems quite unrelated to the reality of a school as it pounds away at theory and academic pursuit. Bernard Shaw is credited with saying: *"Those who can, do; those who can't, teach."* At the college where I worked the cynics amongst us elaborated on his ideas with: "If you can't do anything then teach, and if you can't teach either, then become a teacher educator."

As a parent I learnt what should not be happening in schooling as I watched my perfect children grow imperfect. And as a grandparent I become terribly anxious when any one of my grandchildren is not having a perfect educational experience.

I use my biography only as a way of developing the thesis that one's idea of what constitutes a good school is very strongly located in where we are personally in maturity and ambition when we make the judgment. What you want for your children now depends at least in part in how you feel about yourself now and how you recall your schooling.

Some of the things that particularly stand out for me from the independent schools that I have evaluated during the last few years:

- Spontaneous friendliness in young children, friendliness born of trust
- Genuine and heartfelt commendations of the principal by the staff
- Two 13 year old Grade 7 boys telling me that the most valued thing that the school had given them to take into high school was the ability to organize themselves.
- A Grade 3 boy in a focus group admitting that he was a bully and bursting into tears
- Grade 7 boys learning to dance from a ballroom dance teacher, and all clearly in love with her.
- The huge value children place on having a friend
- Children in a school with a minute playground perfectly happily finding a space somewhere to play their games.
- Grade 2 children helping Grade 1s with their reading

... and I could go on and on but you will notice that what is distinctive is not the statistically measurable things like marks or scores, or how the curriculum is being delivered.

But perhaps the most abiding impression of the very many schools that I have been in is an almost depressing sameness about them. It's well documented that in a changing society schools are almost the last thing to change. There are heaps of people who don't want them to change – they want them to be like

when they went to school, because that is familiar, because that seemed like a safe time, they have nostalgic memories of that myth of *childhood innocence* and they have a sense of ... *it was good enough for me, and after all I did alright didn't I?*

In one school that which was evaluated last year I experienced an extreme example of this. Everybody was happy at this school: principal, staff, parents, children. The school functioned well enough. The principal had been a pupil at the same school and she kept it running in much the same way as when she was there. The parents recognized everything about it from their own childhoods and most of the staff had been there for many years and liked it the way it was.

When I first walked into the classrooms and watched the teaching I thought I was in a time warp – everything was entirely recognizable from when I started teaching in the sixties. There were no, *literally no*, concessions to the electronic age in the classrooms. The blackboards squeaked in the same way and held a permanent dusty appearance in the same way. *Janet and John*, and the *Wide Range Readers* were still the chief reading material and the handcraft lessons were still largely devoted to making things out of rubbish - or making rubbish out of things.

I recall craft lessons from my teaching days where the Grade 2's spent some weeks making ducks out of wire coat-hangers. I got into trouble for commenting that I supposed it was better for them than making coat-hangers out of ducks.

You have to ask the question *and so what was wrong in the sixties?* The answer is very little – for the sixties. The children at this particular school have nothing to compare their school with and are happily wallowing in a peaceful, slow, unimaginative, seven or eight years. The staff have repeated the lessons so often that prep is simply not necessary. What is wrong in that school is that no one there is thinking, no boundaries are being pushed, it doesn't occur to anyone to challenge the status quo. What is particularly wrong is that the children are learning to think that school is a place which is separated from the reality of 2009.

But is it a bad school? No, certainly not. It could be a lot better, but that school nevertheless has the critical ingredient of good primary schooling and that is that the relationships between the teachers and the children are good and the children feel safe and are happy.

A bit more biography if you don't mind. One of my grandchildren has what are broadly described as 'special needs'. Her parents describe their emotions when she started at a remedial school in Cape Town as being a huge shock. When they arrived in their good car, on the way from their good house to their successful jobs, they watched the other children arrive. Many cultures, many dark children, many poor children, lots of cerebral palsy children in calipers or wheel chairs.

My daughter phoned me that night and said: *"Mom, you were a great mother but you let me down badly. We never learnt about disabled people and we never experienced other cultures or socio-economic levels."* She was raised in apartheid South Africa.

One of the pities of post-apartheid South Africa is that there are still many children living high socio-economic lives whose school experience denies them the experience of people who are different. I am afraid that this tends to be more so in independent schools than in state schools.

But let's get down to what is quality schooling and how does one recognize it? My philosophy of education and the principles against which I judge the quality of a school, or schooling system, are obviously a sum of all the experiences that I have related, and many others too. It's actually easier to say what should not be there than to pin down the often nebulous qualities of a good school.

In the Independent Quality Assurance Agency where I work at managing the evaluation of schools we have designed an instrument that describes the broad areas of operation of a school and then breaks them down into what we call quality targets against which we help schools to measure themselves. That leads us quite

a long way to coming to a fair description of a good school, but it can never be complete because as I have said earlier some of the critical ingredients fall into the broad description of attitude and relationships.

This is where governments get education wrong. Our government pours a huge percentage of the national fiscus into education and still we march on with much of our public education in an appalling shambles, with more generations of children getting a raw deal. And it's not just in South Africa. Public education systems in many countries just don't get it right, in fact they get it very wrong. You can have all the technical stuff right but without healthy attitudes prevailing education cannot succeed.

The IQAA method of school evaluation requires the school to evaluate itself. Without exception the schools that are really good are the most perceptive and the most critical when it comes to identifying where they could be doing things better. The IQAA evaluation done at this school in 2007 was a very good example of that.

An attitude of self-criticism, of frank acknowledgement of failure or what is perhaps worse, disappointing ordinariness, is where true quality begins. The same schools are usually the ones where the teachers rejoice in their school, believe in their school, and are prepared to push the boundaries to become better at what they do.

In my view the decision about which primary school will be best for your children is somewhat more important than the choice of high school. In the primary school *all* the foundations are laid – *all of them*. Here the children develop the basis of:

- Reading, writing, listening, calculating, thinking, discovering
- Evaluating, problem solving, researching, working with others, competing
- Socialising, tolerating, trusting, judging, compromising, coping with bullies
- Learning how to be a friend and how to have a sense of humour of the appropriate kind
- Throwing, catching, kicking, stroke play, winning, losing,
- Experiencing feelings of disappointment and triumph
- Learning ecological awareness
- Understanding social responsibility
- Integrity, compassion and respect – your school motto

You could list forty others.

You may have noticed that I don't mention facts or knowledge anywhere in that list. We live in a knowledge society and you will all have heard the statistics about how fast new knowledge is exploding onto our consciousness and into every facet of our lives. So why not *knowledge* in primary education?

There is plenty of it, of course. Facts and knowledge provide *the vehicle* for mastering the skills and values and attitudes I have mentioned. And providing interest through exposing the children to a multitude of facts, stories, events and pictures and famous people is a critical feature of good primary teaching. But acquiring facts and knowledge should not be the purpose. A vehicle is not the destination of a journey.

So the question that I still need to address is: "Which will be best for my child – the public school or the independent school?"

I have been into many excellent public schools and many excellent independent schools. I have watched wonderful young adults emerge from both.

However, in my experience independent schools are more likely to recognize that their purpose is not to help the economy, political parties, sporting codes, churches or anything else to prosper. Their purpose is to serve the best interests of the children in the school. Independent schools also have access to a greater variety of interesting teachers, and greater independence in the hiring of teachers.

A Canadian writer called Robertson Davies says in his novel, *Fifth Business*:

“If a boy can’t have a good teacher, give him a psychological cripple or an exotic failure to cope with; just don’t give him a bad, dull teacher. This is where the private schools score over state-run schools; they can accommodate a few cultured madmen on the staff without having to offer explanations.”

I can’t remember who it is on this staff that fits the description of ‘cultured madman.’

A good independent school recognizes that it’s not the *status* of independence that is important, it’s independence as a *quality*. That quality allows a school to be open, honest, creative. It allows a school to take the best from the national curriculum and add so much more. A school which is truly independent embraces originality, pushes the boundaries, tries new things, follows interests, makes decisions based on the circumstances of the moment. A school that is truly independent respects the right of individuals and resists uniformity.

What all really good schools share is an attitude that cultivates excellent relationships within the school and the absolute belief that the school is there for the well-being and full realization of the potential of each individual. That is my philosophy of good schooling, and while I repeat that there are a good number of excellent public schools, I think that you are more likely to get those virtues in an independent school.

You have chosen this school for good and sound reasons. You will choose your child’s next school for good and sound reasons. Your supreme opportunity now is to make sure every day that your child gets the full benefit of the school that you have chosen for good and sound reasons. This is an excellent school. Rejoice in it!

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JUNE 10 2009