ENGLISH TEACHERS' CONFERENCE

Eden Grove
Rhodes University
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The Chairperson, members of the Institute for the Study of English in Africa, conference participants, presenters, distinguished guests, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen – Molweni, good morning.

It is my great pleasure to welcome you to Rhodes University, to iRhini/Grahamstown, to the Makana District and to this first and historic English Teachers' Conference.

I wish to extend an especial welcome to all our previous and current ACE students. You are more than students but also our colleagues and partners in our common endeavour to realize the potential and talents of our children and youth through improving the quality of schooling in general and performance in English in particular. And so for you, I wish to use the lovely Irish greeting *Céad míle fáilte* – a hundred thousand welcomes! I also with to register my appreciation to you for your commitment in attending this conference, aware that you are giving up some of your holidays and have had to entail costs to attend.

One of our key challenges is to remake our schools and education.

Despite almost universal formal participation in schooling, our schools continue to display significant problems related to drop outs, retention, progression and successful completion. As has been noted, '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 (total of 86 531 in 2005) senior certificate endorsements. Another 10% of the historically black schools, which include the Department of Education's Dinaledi schools, produce a further 20% of all senior certificate endorsements. Thus while 20% of secondary schools produce 80% of senior certificate endorsements the remaining 80% of secondary schools produce only 20% of senior certificate endorsements.

It should be clear that a fundamental challenge is to improve the quality of education in schools. To be sure, resources for equity of access for poor students, targeted nutrition programmes, facilities, toilets 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 necessary conditions.

One is to ensure that there exists a culture of effective learning and teaching and where this is absent to move diligently restore this culture. A key element here is purposeful and effective educational leadership and management on the part of a range of actors that include the Ministry of Education, provincial ministries, district offices and, especially school heads. Indeed, it is argued that a key distinguishing feature between the 20% of the historically black schools that produce 80% of all senior certificate endorsements 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 it is argued 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 said 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 indeed the necessary conditions for effective education and schooling, then it is our duty to forge partnerships to ensure that they are put in place, in general and in the subject areas in which students must learn and teachers must teach. Otherwise, we will continue to deny new generations of our children and youth their constitutional and social rights and ultimately also their dignity.

We continue to suffer from a colonial and apartheid past that is a great obstacle on 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' (Mbeki, 2004), both with respect to developing the capabilities of English-language teachers and our schools.

A conference is an opportunity for mutual learning. We 'conference' to share ideas and understandings, dialogue, debate and discuss, network, find ways of supporting each other and renew our commitment to our everyday jobs and responsibilities. I hope that this conference and future conferences will be one part of an ongoing partnership between Rhodes and English teachers that covers many different activities.

I hope that you will enjoy a stimulating and productive three days and that you will emerge with insights and ideas that will build on this very important first conference and enhance our capabilities to address the challenges of English-language teaching in our schools. I also hope that you will have an enjoyable stay at Rhodes and that you will find us hospitable hosts.