

Graduation Address, College of Education, Massey University, 12th May, 2005

by Emeritus Professor Ivan Snook

Chancellor, Vice Chancellor, Pro Chancellor special guests, members of Council, staff; graduands and graduates, recipients of diplomas; relatives, friends and whanau; ladies and gentlemen.

At an Auckland graduation ceremony recently, Massey University conferred an honorary doctorate on an eighty year old man: Elwyn Richardson. He was honoured for his creative approach to teaching for which he became renowned both in New Zealand and overseas. Central to his work was his profound respect for the emerging abilities of his students: he drew out the best in them and developed their latent talents. Massey University proposes him as a model of what it is to be a teacher.

Most of you receiving degrees or diplomas today will be entering teaching or related work in early childhood centres, primary and secondary schools or educational agencies. In your College years you have learned like Dr Richardson to focus on individual students and to work to ensure that they come to love learning: you want to be educators in the very best sense of that word. But there are problems.

A few weeks ago I stood behind a young man in a shopping queue. He wore a T shirt which said:

I WENT TO UNIVERSITY AND ALL I GOT WAS THIS \$35,000 T SHIRT.

A touch of humour yes, but perhaps some tragedy too, as it reminds us that, like it or not, you will work in a system which constantly undermines your educative work: you will be encouraged to neglect the education of your students to satisfy the demands of political masters.

Nearly twenty years ago, a government transformed the whole structure of education in New Zealand as well as much else beside. The result was not just a change in structures, funding, and administrative procedures. What changed was the nature of teaching, the nature of learning and, arguably, the very nature of the students you are to teach. As a result

- Book keeping replaces pastoral care;
- Testing squeezes out teaching;
- Skills training replaces education;
- Competition drives out cooperation;
- **And** compliance pushes out creativity.
- Teachers face increased *surveillance* by means of standardised curricula, frequent appraisals, and supervision by the Education Review Office.
- Teachers are less and less permitted to think for themselves: they are seen not as professionals but as skilled technicians.

- Where they used to help design the curriculum, now they merely 'deliver' it.
- And the school's role in promoting social justice is minimised. To raise it is to be deemed "politically correct" a term of abuse which discourages any concern for fairness.

The task of educators is to develop the minds and hearts of young people by introducing them into the traditions of human thought and feeling painfully gained over the centuries and preserved in the sciences, humanities and arts. Yet, under the new regime, you are asked simply to prepare young people to be workers: their future as informed and thoughtful citizens is neglected.

Not only that. It seems that we now face a new breed of students: 'children of the market.' Much of the evidence for this is anecdotal but it is starting to show up in more formal studies. A study at the University of Otago noted the recent emergence of a new group of young people. They exhibit high levels of materialism and consumption, have few political interests, lack any concern for a healthy diet, do not place any value on family life and focus on individual activities such as TV and video games.

These findings reinforce the growing international literature on "kiddyculture". Led by business interests, young people are seduced by video games, text messaging, music, food chains, and movies to see their main function in life as **consumers**. And they not only consume physical things: they see education, not as the gentle nurturing of the human spirit, but as a commodity to be bought, used and discarded. This makes your job difficult.

In contrasting the idealism of Elwyn Richardson with the profound changes of the past few years, I am drawing attention to your difficult position as teachers. You are caught between the *personal* and the *political*. Wanting to get on with the exciting task of educating your students, you are subjected at every turn to political demands which distract you.

And this is never ending. If you scan the educational policies of political parties as we approach a general election, you will see that there is more to come. **They just cannot leave education alone.** Education is now a major site of struggle: for political parties, for business interests and, indeed, for every group which wants to capture the hearts of the young.

At all levels of the system, I find staff engaged in '**joyless compliance**', carrying out meaningless tasks in order to comply with some managerial dogma. The next step is cynicism. There is nothing sadder than a cynical teacher: cynicism dries up the energy needed to confront energetic young people day after day. A better response is the nurturing of critical faculties. Critical thought cuts through the nonsense which passes for educational wisdom and motivates us to find better answers.

Critical thinking will not only help you to resolve *your* tensions: it is an attitude which will rub off on your students who, themselves, may be led to resist the kiddyculture in which they are immersed.

To this end I suggest that you

- Keep up professional reading so that you can recognise nonsense even when it comes from principals or ERO officers.
- Continue to think. Take nothing for granted especially when it comes from those bent on subverting the educational ideal.
- Work collegially with those teachers who still retain their enthusiasm despite the constant attacks on teachers.
- Form coalitions with parents for they really care about their children. Parents and teachers are natural allies though powerful forces work to drive them apart.
- Conform where you have to and resist when you can. In the long run, the forces of light may be more powerful than the forces of darkness.

Today's ceremony is both old and new. The ritual is an ancient tradition. But it speaks to contemporary values: it acknowledges talent, hard work, learning and professional dedication. I join in congratulating you on your achievement and in honouring those—parents, school teachers, families, friends, university staff—who have helped you to get here.

The ability of people to participate in society is dependent on the quality of the education they receive. And this depends, not on large bureaucracies, glossy brochures, curriculum documents, or flowery mission statements, but on *the personal qualities of teachers*. I wish you well in your task of helping to **create the future**.