



Graduation Address, Delivered at the College of Education Ceremony, Massey University, Palmerston North, 11th May 2006

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Chancellor, Vice Chancellor, Members of Council, special guests, academic staff, and especially, graduands, graduates and recipients of diplomas, together with whanau, families and friends.

Tena koutou, tena koutou, tena tatou katoa.

This is indeed a great honour to address you on this significant occasion. For me, as a person who has devoted my working life to teaching, reflecting and writing about education, this is a privileged opportunity to share with you some of my deepest convictions on that subject.

Some of you are graduating today as beginning teachers, ready to take up your first appointment in an early childhood centre, or a primary, intermediate or secondary school. Others of you are receiving a degree or diploma that signifies your continuing professional development. Whatever your current role or status within the community of educators, you are, in my view, all members of a time-honoured and noble profession. Your task is essential to human survival itself. However, there is in our society today a grim paradox in the form of a contradiction between the importance and necessary value of education to society and the extent to which the education profession is valued by the community at large and by its political leaders. In this address, I shall consider both sides of this paradox.

With regard to the first point, it is I believe undisputable that public education is a necessary and essential means by which human beings, both as individuals and collectively, can have some hope of shaping and controlling their future.

We live in a world that faces problems on a scale never before known. It is a world in which such problems have dimensions that almost defy comprehension. It is a world in which more than 1.2 billion people live on less than two New Zealand dollars per day. It is a world where each day 30,000 people die from extreme poverty; where more than ten million children die of preventable diseases every year; where more than one billion people do not have access to safe water; where 876 million adults are illiterate, two thirds of them women.

These enormous problems of poverty and injustice contribute not only to human misery but to the hostility and violence that is manifested in acts of terrorism, war and genocide. These are social and political problems that none of us can ignore or wish away. Nor can we ignore the immanent dangers of environmental degradation.

Last year, leading scientists from 95 countries published an authoritative report on the state of the global environment at the start of the new millennium.

They found disturbing evidence relating to the depletion of natural resources, global warming, loss of biodiversity and damage to eco-systems vital to maintaining life. This report, based on the research of more than 1,000 scientists, presents an urgent warning of global disaster unless there are radical changes in the way nature is treated at all levels of decision-making.

What does this deeply disturbing picture mean for education? Clearly, education in itself cannot directly solve the immense problems that confront humankind. However, without education, I would argue, there can be no solutions and catastrophe becomes inevitable. As long ago as 1920, the great English writer, H.G. Wells commented, prophetically, that "Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe". This assertion has never been truer than it is today. It is a race that education must win, but it can only win through the dedication and commitment of the professional educational community, supported by the wider community and its leaders.

Catastrophe can be averted only through the actions of governments and international bodies, but the political will for these actions, in democratic societies such as ours, depends upon the educational empowerment of citizens. The weight of responsibility for this process rests heavily on the shoulders of the education profession but they cannot bear this burden on their own.

This brings me to the second aspect of the paradox to which I referred. How much does our society value the vital role that the education profession has in educating and empowering people, both young people and adults, for active and responsible participation in society? Regrettably, I believe, the categorical answer is 'NOT ENOUGH'.

As recently as last week, a research report titled *Perceptions of Teachers and Teaching* was released. This research, conducted by Professor Ruth Kane and the late Professor Mary Mallon of Massey University, was commissioned by the Ministry of Education and the New Zealand Teachers' Council. This nationwide study involved over 2,000 participants, including teachers in the early childhood, primary and secondary sectors, principals, board members, students and student teachers. The research shows that while teachers are generally positive about their influence on student achievement, they feel in many respects over-worked, inadequately rewarded, under-valued and insufficiently supported. Nevertheless, in spite of these negative perceptions of an unsupportive environment, "Those involved in teaching as a career (principals, teachers and student teachers) report that their decisions were based predominantly on intrinsic motivations related to wanting to work with children, to contribute to society and to do a job of which they feel proud".

There are some strong, and I would hope salutary, messages in this research, not only for our policy-makers but for the wider community, including community leaders, politicians and, not least, the media. Our valuing of education itself is directly related to the extent to which we value our educational professionals. As a society, we must find ways to value these people more.

In referring to educational professionals, I am of course referring to many of you who are sitting in the audience today, particularly those who are being honoured in this ceremony. Perhaps, therefore, I am speaking to the converted. You have already demonstrated your commitment to the value of education and

you have chosen to pursue a career in which you can demonstrate your commitment.

I have no doubt that most of you are motivated by your desire to work with children and young people, to contribute to society and to take pride in a job that has many intrinsic rewards. As I stated at the outset of this address, you are members of a time-honoured and noble profession. You have much to contribute to society, although society may hold you responsible for more than is reasonable or fair. Teachers cannot be responsible for social and economic inequalities. Teachers cannot provide solutions to the problems of poverty, community apathy or social dislocation. Schools cannot create jobs. Nevertheless, teachers can be enormously influential. Despite the current insistence on measurable outcomes, a teacher's influence has no end point; there is no telling where it stops.

I began this address by claiming that education, more than ever before, has become the key to human survival. I then suggested that as a society our valuing of education is diminished because we do not value enough the contribution of the education profession. I want to conclude, given my audience, with some suggestions for the profession that could, perhaps, assist in turning this situation around.

Firstly, I would emphasise that education involves cooperation. Educational professionals are most successful in achieving their educational purposes when they work not as independent individuals but as members of, and contributors to, a professional community. Collective action is more effective in achieving goals than isolated individual effort.

Secondly, I would emphasise the importance of trust. We live in a society that is preoccupied with risk and risk management. But risk breeds fear and fear engenders mistrust. Teachers, along with other professionals, appear to be trusted less and less. They are not even trusted to comfort children physically because of the fear of child abuse. To counter this trend, teachers need to develop more trust in their colleagues, so as to build a professional community that is bound to an ethical code and that has trust in its members to honour that code.

Thirdly, I would emphasise the centrality of professional judgement. The practice of education involves much more than exercising a set of skills or implementing a prescribed course of action. Education involves making decisions that can have profound consequences for people's lives. Professional educators must have the confidence and trust in themselves to make those judgements and to be prepared to justify them to those who are so affected.

Finally, my message to all of you who are graduating or receiving other awards today is that you should rightfully feel very proud, not only of this present achievement, but of your courageous decision to commit your personal future to a vocation on which the future of all humanity depends.

Na reira tena koutou tena koutou tena tatou katoa.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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