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The lives of children, citizenship and teacher education: Challenges and Opportunities

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06 November 2013

Rector and Vice Chancellor, Professor Jonathan Jansen, my host, the Dean of the Faculty of Education, Professor Dennis Francis, Deans from Faculties across campus, Colleagues from the Faculty of Education, Honoured Guests, Ladies, and Gentleman, thank you for attending this address. I would like to thank the Dean of the Faculty of Education for the invitation. A special thanks too, to Professor Rita Niemann, Director: Postgraduate Studies & Research in the office of the Dean for facilitating the process. Thanks to Elsa Bester for making the arrangements and getting me from Grahamstown to Bloemfontein. It takes longer to fly and needs more elaborate planning than it does to drive from Grahamstown to Bloemfontein!

I would also like to pause for a second to welcome members of my family who travelled from Pretoria and Johannesburg respectively to render moral support. Phyllis, Elaine, and Cynthia, thank you for making the trip. It means a lot to me. It would be the first time that I speak uninterrupted for about 45 minutes in the company of family! If any of you have a large family, as I do, you will appreciate the significance of this statement!

First, let me say what a privilege it is to have been asked to do a lecture that honours a leading social and political commentator and stalwart in the fight for justice and equity in South Africa, Dr Ramphele Mamphele. I truly am humbled. Dr Mamphele was my Vice Chancellor at the University of Cape Town during the early years of my

academic career. As a woman, she embodies many qualities I admire. Her fortitude and uncompromising spirit serves as an inspiration to me and others as we confront ourselves in trying to make meaning of this complex country we inhabit. She stands tall as a beacon yet at the same time a critical compass in South Africa's social and political landscape; one unafraid to add her voice in challenging South Africans who possess the political, economic, social and cultural capital to stand up **and** apart as citizens. She is unashamed and in fact unapologetic about making clear her position on collective and individual social responsibility. I admire her intolerance for mediocrity! She does not make demands on others that she herself does not exemplify.

Excellence, integrity, equity and justice and the need to find creative solutions that serve the greater good are aspects I associate with this amazing woman of the soil. I would like to pause and salute an ordinary woman who lives an extraordinary life.

South Africa is a country rife with discontinuities, ambivalences, and contradictions yet as a richly textured social canvass, is imbued with so many possibilities and promise. Professor Crain Soudien had the following to say at a recent event that marked the opening of the Teacher Education facility at Rhodes University, and I quote: "South Africa is a major world laboratory. There are few countries in the world in which the complex factors of conquest and subjugation, migration and emigration, settlement and upheaval, occupation and dispossession, integration and segregation, conflict and reconciliation sit so visibly and tangibly on the landscape.

The psyche of South Africans, those things that most people don't have and can't put into words about themselves, and their attitudes and beliefs, the things they can do and say about themselves and others, are impregnated by these experiences. We have here in this country the full range in all their extremes of issues that stand at the heart of what it means to be human: the past, the present and the future and all their social expressions." He goes on to say later on "Few countries in the world test our sense of self-of who we are-and our commitments to ourselves and others as intensely as ours does.

It is much simpler in other parts of the world. It was much simpler during the period of Apartheid. It was sufficient to be an Afrikaner, or Zulu, a man, a woman, a patriarch, etc. That clarity has gone!" Such is our country; one that on the one hand offers opportunities and unimagined hope and possibilities for its citizenry, yet at the same time seems unable, incapable, and sometimes even unwilling to confront itself and the deep fractures that continue to write themselves on individual and collective identities. Nowhere is this tension starker than in this country's response to educating young citizens, who, together with their parents and/or guardians, hold on to the promise of education.

I would like to spend a few minutes pursuing this complexity and in so doing weave together the three aspects I propose in the title, namely the lives of children, citizenship and teacher education. I could have done this by presenting statistics or media stories that depict the state of education in South Africa, which we all know is in crisis. I chose instead to invite you into my life and to share four personal stories.

Here goes: I grew up on a farm in White River, a small town in the then Eastern Transvaal. While my parents did not have the opportunity to complete primary school, they understood the intrinsic value and extrinsic purchase of education. During my formative years, my father worked in a remote rural area with no school in close proximity.

The upshot was that I spent the first three years of school boarding with strangers. I cannot recall the detail of those three years. In fact, it's not that I can't remember; I made a conscious choice to block any memory of the pain and longing for my mother's voice and hug. I chose instead to imagine that I had a relatively normal childhood. After all, I saw my parents every holiday, not a small price to pay for education now is it? My parents moved closer to town when I started Grade 4; a decision that meant I could at least sleep at home every night. It had its own consequences though. It meant walking three miles to school every morning. This journey started at the crack of dawn because schools in those days started promptly at 7.30! It was an interesting journey ... one that took my siblings and I past a number of schools enroute to the line of prefabricated buildings at the bottom end of town. It started with us walking past Uplands Preparatory School, which was about

200 metres from our home. The journey took us past White River Primary and Rob Ferreira High School, both of which were at the edge of town, about 2 miles into our walk. Another mile and we would reach our destination; tired and hungry after this long haul, with temperatures already well beyond 20 degrees.

But, I agree with Crain that life was simpler then. My parents did not need to be concerned with fears of abduction, human trafficking, physical and sexual abuse, harassment or even rape as many parents have to be today. This journey was relatively safe; accept for the young Afrikaner rugby jocks who trained on our path after school. They thought nothing of smacking a little 'coloured' girl or kicking a 'K… er' just for fun and just because these happen to be 'in their path'. One learnt very early on to not only scurry into the bush when one saw their silhouettes in the distance, but also to know your place even on a public road!

By the way, we were not alone on this journey every morning come hailstorm or sunshine. We were accompanied by Thoko, a fifteen year old girl still in primary school; Sibongile, 10 years old like me yet still in Grade 1, Bhekindoda, a 17 year old boy in a special class, Sipho, a lanky 18 year old trying to make meaning of his second year in Grade 7; Thandabantu, a witty 12 year old who seemed to master maths as easily as he could string together a poem.

There were many more. We all travelled in the same direction until we reached the edge of town. My siblings and I would turn left and head down to the one end of town to our "coloured school" while the rest headed in the opposite direction, to the school designated for Black Africans. Normal for the early 70's one would say. But, how much has changed for the little Jean's and Sipho's in rural and poor environments today? I come back to this later on.

The second is a story about my son. Aegean was born in 1993, a supposed born free. He attended a racially diverse school in Cape Town. In fact, some of his friends were children of mixed race. His dear friend, Luyolo's mother is Afrikaner and his dad, Sandile, an umXhosa. Aegean spent 10 years at this school that at one level privileged the individual child, yet at another level promoted a strong collective identity, one that had community at its centre. Children were not compared to each

other; I did not ever know my child's normative position in class. Assessment had to do with where he started at a point in time, and his progress academically, socially, emotionally, and implicitly spiritually. An explicit goal of the school was to have teachers teach in ways that developed children as caring, empathetic and good human beings; a goal that resonated with my own beliefs and values about education and what I believe we needed to do to prepare children for their place in the world.

The consequence was that it was not uncommon for Aegean to ask questions about the world ... natural and social. He would ask why animals needed to suffer and why people killed and ate them (you can tell that he is vegetarian; a 6ft4" one at that!!!). He would also ask why some people stood at the traffic light asking for money, why some people slept on the street and why they didn't have a home to go to. He would always make sure that I gave them something even though I struggled with the tension between creating dependency and helping.

Aegean knew my history and that of my family. We would visit my hometown and during these times, he would be confronted with my past; an experience that made him increasingly aware of his privilege. He was aware of the deep social and economic disparities that not only produced and reproduced difference but also differentiated people and shaped material experiences amongst the South African populace. He understood that racial orchestration lay at the heart of this.

Despite knowledge on the racial categorisation and its impact on the South African landscape, he had not been confronted with questions about *his* race until he arrived in Makana, Grahamstown. Aegean identified himself as a South African and not in racial terms. We often discussed what race *does, what it allowed and disallowed* rather than 'race' as a phenomenon or an identity marker he needed to subscribe to or be marked by.

As a mother, I understood my life work to be creating conditions that helped him to understand these distinctions so as not to perpetuate but rupture notions of self through crafting an individual path that was respectful of others, irrespective of race, class, gender, status, etc. My role was and still is to support Aegean to become a good human being; someone who embodies ideals that extend beyond his individual needs.

The schools I had chosen espoused ideals that not only resonated with my own. In my view, or so I thought, they sought opportunities to work productively with notions and experiences of difference. Primacy, I imagined, was given to facilitating children embodying individual agency while at the same time creating conditions in which they gained understanding and experience of relational and collective responsibility and agency.

Imagine my surprise when one day in 2011, when Aegean (who has green eyes and tightly curled light brown hair... in some circles we would call it 'kroes hare') came home very distraught because of questions on race by peers. I was overwhelmed watching my confident and handsome child cry uncontrollably, shouting: "How am I supposed to answer their questions when I don't know my race!"

I confused and actually angered him even more when I tried to rationalise and respond to him using sociological explanations and concepts (so typically as an academic). I explained the difference between his personal view of himself and ways in which people marked or 'othered' him in an attempt to situate and understand themselves. I explained that in SA, it was not unusual for people to still invoke racial markers or categories of description to make meaning of themselves and others. I highlighted that people also use class, gender, social status, etc. to distinguish what Judith Butler terms the 'aberrant' or 'other'.

In trying to explain to him the difference between what people saw and how he identified himself, I said, "While we don't subscribe to this marker, most South Africans I imagine, identify you as "Coloured". His retort was "I don't know what Coloured means!!" He explained that there were some learners at his school who identified themselves as "Coloured" but that he had no point of reference or nothing

in common with them. His view of the world was informed by different sets of experiences and values and a different way of understanding and being in the world. He also said that he had no frame of reference to locate his 'Colouredness' because (a) he had not needed to confront it before, (b) no experience of living in a "Coloured" township or suburb and (c) had not had a common cause to fight against: Apartheid ... something he said shaped my life as his mum and gave me my collective and relational identity. I was completely floored by this.

The third story concerns my experience as an aspirant teacher. I trained as a Foundation Phase teacher by completing a primary teacher's diploma at Bechet College in Durban. This diploma prepared me to teach children to read and write in a particular way, using particular texts, the Kathy and Mark series. I was given the script, a 'red book' literally, to follow. The expectation was that I would not deviate from this 'red book' as it offered lesson plans as well as the content children needed to know irrespective of their contextual realities.

One of the requirements on the programme was that students would conduct six home visits during teaching practice. The homes I visited were some of the poorest in the area where the school was located. Home visits opened my eyes to the realities that shaped children's daily lives and affected their engagement in class in ways that the programme or the 'little red book' did not clearly articulate or account for. You see, we were taught the mechanics of teaching, with little explanation of how to incorporate or appropriate the information gathered from these home visits.

The programme did little to prepare us on how to use the material gathered to create responsive, developmentally appropriate and contextually relevant learning environments that would ensure success for all learners irrespective of the conditions witnessed in the homes. I was deeply affected by this disjuncture. How could I ignore significant information that, at the time, provided me with useful insights into why some children were able and others unable to read or write?

I recognised that I would be failing as a teacher if I ignored or pretended that the context outside of school did not matter. I had evidence of its material effects. Put differently, I realised that the context outside of school *mattered* at more than one level. First, it shaped children's sense of self and being in the world. I witnessed how different children responded to (a) the idea of my visit, and (b) the experience.

Excitement by some stood in stark contrast with tentativeness by others. Second, context outside of school mattered because it shaped how children made meaning of what was taught ***in*** class. Its mediatory role could thus not be ignored or taken for granted. I witnessed large families sandwiched into a 4-roomed house with no privacy for children or their parents. There was very little evidence in these homes of books or resources that mediated what was taught and valued in school. Most of the parents relied on children to read the notes sent home from school.

I could go on about the conditions. Suffice to say that this context had major consequences for how children positioned themselves and indeed, how they were positioned by me and other teachers and management. At another level and significantly, it shaped *my* perceptions of learning and teaching.

I was confronted with questions about the relationship between learner and teacher, the mediating context, and conceptions of what counted as 'desirable' educational outcomes. I realised that learning and teaching are as much a way of being as they are processes with intended and unintended outcomes.

Tentative and inexperienced as I was as an aspiring teacher, I recognised my role and obligation that had to do with taking account of circumstances that shaped children's lives and experience of school while at the same time not allowing such realities to determine what I imagined and hoped for; for the little ones in my care. I determined to dream, to imagine, to hope for different educational outcomes for these children; ones that included not only creating conditions that enabled them to know and react to their world, but importantly provide them with tools to confront, interact, navigate, reflect, and transform it for themselves and others.

This experience contributed to shaping my definition of learning and teaching, ideas *about* learning and teaching, my understanding of their interrelationship, and an appreciation for and significance of the context in which these converge.

The final story is more recent. My dear student whom I will call Christine is a Life Skills teacher who received training as a counsellor from a Non-Governmental Organisation.

No course in her initial teacher preparation prepared her for the complexity of children's lives that she witnessed daily. Some professional development programmes she attended dealt with issues of gender violence, sexuality, and HIV and AIDS separately, without a deep analysis of their interlink.

In fact many of the HIV and AIDS courses, focused on helping teachers to teach facts on contraction, prevention and treatment with little engagement with the context in which people make meaning of this information. The discourses surrounding the pandemic that include *inter alia,* stigma, silence, taboo, fear, and denial rarely found expression in meaningful ways in discussions on the pandemic in these courses.

Often, a lecture mode formed the basis of how teachers were 'skilled' to mediate this information. Christine felt underprepared for what she encountered in her professional life because, in part, her personal life was peppered with contradictions.

You see, it was normal for her husband to come home at 3am and claim his conjugal rights. It was normal for him to slap her if she refused. It was normal for her to accept that he would not use protection even though he had impregnated a woman a few streets away from their home in a middle class environment.

Christine's experience is characteristic of the women in her community; violence, abuse, infidelity are normal practices that shape their lives irrespective of their status as educated women and despite the information they possess on contraction and prevention. But, the dilemma she faces extends beyond this.

Christine confronts children at school whose life experiences make hers pale in comparison. I give you an example of two such stories emerging from her thesis that investigated the school experiences HIV-positive secondary school learners on ARV treatment.

Like my story above, she realised very quickly into the study that experiences outside of school mediated children's participation in school. She was thus obliged to understand the context of their lives before she could really understand their school experiences as HIV-positive learners on ARV treatment. She had in-depth interviews with 8 children, using timelines, drawings and other methodologies to elicit responses.

Here with a summary of the experiences, with permission of course: Johanna was born in 1992 and is an only child. She never met her father and does not even know his name. Johanna's mother passed away in 2000. She went to stay with her grandmother, aunts, cousins and nieces until 2002, when she became ill and was admitted to hospital several times. Her grandmother sent her to stay with the workers on the family farm away from city the following year. Her life at the farm was difficult because she had no support. Johanna described 2004 as the most difficult year of her life because it was when her uncle disclosed her HIV status of which she was unaware.

He came to the farm in a drunken state and made disparaging comments about her mother; saying she was a prostitute. He proceeded to disclose Johanna's status, likening her to her dead mother. Johanna, too ill to take care of herself, was taken to hospital by a woman from a neighbouring farm. She stayed in hospital for what she reports to be a long time, with no visits from family. Once discharged and on ARV medication, she went to stay with the neighbour who also ensured that she returned to school. Johanna's cousin disclosed her status to others at school. Not only was she treated badly by her peers, she also made the point that some teachers didn't intervene when learners taunted her whenever she tried to participate in activities in class. She described an incident when she used a cup to drink soup that she bought at school. No one else wanted to use the cup after her. One of the learners suggested that it be thrown in the dustbin. Johanna described the pain, loneliness,

and embarrassment as well as how she attempted suicide, by overdosing with tablets.

Ben was born in 1990. His grandmother was his guardian since his mother's death when he was a year old. His uncle started molesting and raping him in 2000 when Ben was 10. When he had the courage to tell his grandmother about the on-going rape in 2004, she told him to remain silent and keep it secret because after all, his uncle was her son. In 2007, Ben became ill and dropped out of school. The following year he found out that he was HIV-positive; and soon thereafter started taking ARV treatment. He decided to return to school. Most of his male school peers knew Ben had been raped and that he was on ARV medication for HIV. They called him names such as, 'wife', 'gay', and 'AIDS monster'. He confided in a teacher who Ben said showed more interest in wanting to know the details of the rape rather than in showing empathy and offering support.

So, what binds these stories together and what do they animate that has relevance to our deliberations here today? How do they bring together the lives of children, citizenship and teacher education? Let me attempt to respond.

For me, they raise a number of fundamental questions: the first being the context and lives of children in our country and the extent to which we actually know and understand this as teachers, researchers and teacher educators.

My story as a child highlights aspects that still persist today. Rurality, space, nutrition, transport, perceived abandonment, identity, meaningful access all converge in a story that has the unexpected ending you see in front of you today. I say unexpected because the odds were stacked against me and those who shared that three-mile journey with me. We all hoped for a better life, beyond the dusty roads, but it was and still is not the case for the majority of children who live in rural and poor environments. Thoko, Sibongile, Bhekindoda, and Sipho, did not complete school. They disappeared into obscurity, becoming just another unemployed or poorly employed statistic. Thandabantu matriculated but had no support to pursue his dream to become a doctor. He obtained a job as a cashier at a local supermarket. Dreams suspended by the promise of education faded as some

repeated grades, dropped out, dropped back in years later, repeated grades again, became ill, took care of parents, and so it went on.

Little has changed since then for many who inhabit what we define as rural and poor.

Aegean's experience made me confront two issues pertinent here. First, I had not imagined that I would need to confront myself and the decisions I had made about how to raise my son as well as about the choice of schools. Why was there such dis-ease at the core of my being about the choices I had made, ones I dreamed would create a different and more inclusive reality for Aegean and his friend, Luyolo.

I had not imagined that race in its crudest form would shape his sense of self and being in the world as it did on the day I described earlier on. It also raised the second issue, namely mine and our place in the South African education landscape as a researcher and social scientist.

Almost two decades into South Africa's democracy, we have to ask ourselves questions about the sociological constructs we invoke to make meaning of, what Professor Soudien refers to as an extraordinary social landscape. How do we make sense of a world in which the broad sociological constructs (such as race), used as explanatory tools for a long time, no longer serve to animate the complex world we and our children inhabit?

Aegean and Luyolo may look 'Coloured' yet they have no experience of its meaning. The world continually marks them, their individual positioning notwithstanding. What about the experiences of others in Aegean's class, marked by geographic location, religious affiliation, class, gender, and sexual orientation?

How do we work as teacher educators, researchers, and teachers to make meaning of the complexity of our children's lives … experiences we can't even begin to imagine, let alone describe? What new insights do we offer the world as participants in the knowledge construction endeavour as researchers? What language of description do we use to account for and recount an Aegean-type story? In fact, do we have a language of description and if so, what interpretive lenses do we use as we produce new knowledge about his and other such stories? His is one in a host of stories that not only underscore the complexity of the lives of our children, but also the need for new language that helps us make meaning of the extraordinary worlds they inhabit.

The third and fourth stories raise questions and concerns about how we appropriate or take up this knowing in our teaching, teacher education programmes and as we go about our daily lives, as citizens.

What responsibility do we have as parents and teacher educators to demand quality teachers and quality teaching? You see, not all my peers experienced or interpreted the task of home visits as I did. Some just wanted the assignment completed as soon as possible, while others left the task for the last week of teaching practice. Others questioned the relevance of such a task because after all, we could merely interview teachers in whose classes we did our teaching practice.

The teacher education programme had gone some way in enabling me to arrive at one of the most important decisions of my teaching career, one I still hold dear today. However, it had left the outcome to chance; with not all students benefiting from decisions made by lecturers.

There is no doubt that the teacher educators who planned the task recognised its currency and potential advantage, but taken in isolation, it was perceived by students as yet another task or assignment to complete. In particular this task was not framed as central to understanding the intersection between the lives of children and learning.

It was not used to stimulate discussions on the complex interplay between context and meaning-making, pedagogical and content knowledge, teaching and learning, school and everyday knowledge, or between prior and new knowledge. Instead, the outcome and concomitant mark took precedence over the potential learning that could be derived from such a powerful exercise.

The question I pose for us to ponder as teacher educators thus, relates to the goals and outcomes of pre- and in-service programmes beyond their economic purchase. Do we analyse the nature, form and content of such programmes so as to draw links between them and children's lives? Do we interrogate the quality, relevance and currency of our programmes or do we rely on student feedback to evaluate their worth? What drives our teacher education project? To what extent do we reflect on the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of programmes and in so doing, pose questions about what we value and how this translates into how we conceive of their purpose and outcome.

Are we entrapped in human capital perspectives that privilege knowledge, competences and skills which increase personal earnings and contribute to economic productivity or in human rights discourses that while addressing justice, moral and political imperatives, stop short of providing ways in which these ideals may be enacted.

What kind of teachers do we produce or want to produce? However tentative and feeble, together with students, do we attempt to make meaning of this new sociological space that imprints itself on the lives of children or is our gaze on preparing them to 'teach', however we define the term? How do Ben and Josephine's stories materialize in the courses we offer? What experiences do we make available to aspirant teachers that help them understand their humanity and their role in making the world or *a* world? How do we work with them so that they are able to take care of themselves, build resilience, develop empathy, respect, and care while at the same time expect these principles to permeate their engagement with children in class? How do we prepare teachers for the kinds of experiences that children present to them in class? Do we present them with encounters that compel them to confront themselves first and thereafter the difficult South African teaching

and learning landscape? Do we collectively apply our minds as teacher educators to a common project, locally, regionally and nationally?

My experience as a teacher educator is that we leave much to chance. We trust that we know what's best for students; relying sometimes on pedagogies and theories that no longer serve our children.

We fiercely guard our academic independence; with our individual academic projects at stake were we to consider alternative approaches to the nature, form and content of teacher education project. I would say that we can no longer afford such luxury; not in a country where the experiences I describe in all four stories persist at a mammoth scale! We have the responsibility to act differently! We need to prepare teachers who continually who ask questions about their world and their role in its construction and reproduction. We also need to prepare teachers who actively work towards transforming theirs and the world of others. We need to prepare teachers who exude humaneness, who embody and exhibit compassion and kindness.

But we also need to prepare teachers who understand the knowledge project and its reproductive power; teachers who use their privilege as facilitators and co-constructors to better understand themselves and those around them. The final question these stories raise concerns the manner in which the collective 'we' (as ordinary citizens) positions itself in relation to discourses on 'South Africa'.

In my view this often is one of distantiation and othering. Such a position provides the 'we' or 'us' with an escape. 'We' are able or at the very least, 'we' give ourselves permission to abdicate responsibility and from considering our role in South Africa's making. It is easy to divert attention from the role of 'we' and 'us' when South Africa is defined as a geographic or political space, largely shaped by politicians who we can critique from the comfort of our homes. The argument here though, is that we don't merely inhabit a geographic or discursive space; we are at the same time active participants in its production and reproduction. We cannot be voyeurs, masquerading in the background as parents, teachers, teacher educators or researchers. We have a duty to hold ourselves and each other accountable to first understanding the landscape that Ben, Josephine, Aegean, Luyolo, Sipho, Thoko,

Sibongile, Bhekindoda, and Thandabantu inhabit and thereafter actively working to transform their experiences, not counting the cost.

I end with a quote by Ralph Waldo Emerson who said: "The purpose of life is not to be happy. It is to be useful, to be honorable, to be compassionate, to have it make some difference that you have lived and lived well." Thank you for listening.