

EDUCATION AS A CARDINAL EMPOWERMENT TOOL: THE ROLE PLAYED BY THE COLUMBA LEADERSHIP PROGRAMME IN EDUCATIONAL TRANSFORMATION

An address by Dr Reuel J Khoza to the Columba Leadership Annual Report back

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1. Salutation

Most of you are familiar with the impactful, transformative work done by the Columba Leadership Development in various disadvantaged schools throughout South Africa. In this regard Columba addresses a fundamental need in this, our beloved country.

I would hate to bore you with bleak statistical information on how poorly blacks are represented in such crucial fields as engineering, accounting, management, information technology and other skilled areas in commerce and industry- ONE SCORE YEARS AFTER THE ADVENT OF DEMOCRACY!! I would instead like to adapt my theme to the need for education that empowers, education for empowerment, now and in generations to come.

May I commence by briefly sketching the socio- political context in which this challenge manifests: The advent of democracy in 1994 liberated us from apartheid bondage with its attendant crippling effects of such systems as Bantu Education; and launched us firmly enroute to the Promised Land. In recent times however, it turns out that before we reach the Promised Land we have to negotiate our way through the wilderness.

The rough terrain of the wilderness through which we must negotiate our way en route to the Promised Land is characterised by inter alia: the creeping rot in our institutions and infrastructure; the seeming inability of our schools to teach; pervasive slovenliness in standards of efficiency and precision; the cumbersomeness of an overregulated society coupled with a corrupt bureaucracy; the bland arrogance of a majoritarian leadership; the apparent irrelevance of some of our colleges and universities; the myopia and morbid caution of some of our industrial leaders; and the seeming inability of our government to do anything with circumspection. These and other symptoms of our troubled democracy nag at us like a compulsive neurosis, and unless we consciously and purposefully seek to transform the situation, they will continue to plague us like a cancer.

2. What Then Is Education for Empowerment?

The route to a definitive answer is through tortuous analysis and interpretation of several fundamental principles. To understand education for empowerment is not merely to qualify the literal meaning of education with that of empowerment. An understanding of this subject lies not in one's mastery of the Queen's language but one's hopefully more than casual acquaintance with sociological, philosophical political concepts and importantly with epistemology, the study of our method of acquiring knowledge. To derive a useful answer one has to postulate on the theories of man: theories of knowledge and concepts of power.

This forum does not allow us to delve into first principles, fundamental principles of these theories. The theories about to be propounded will have to be largely taken as given to see where they lead us in our quest for understanding the essence of education for empowerment. Furthermore, our assessment and application of these theories may for the most part be implicit or oblique.

There are however, some key concepts and theories fundamental to our understanding that we have to address explicitly in due course. These are the theories of knowledge, life and existence and the concepts of efficacy and power. Theory of knowledge will inform us about education. Efficacy and power will inform us about empowerment. I hope to achieve a useful exposition of these concepts without being too esoteric and pedantic.

To speak of education for empowerment is to suggest that education may be for purposes other than empowerment, that there is, or may be education for enslavement; education for impoverishment; education for subjugation. To reflect even briefly on our troubled educational history for the past generation, one cannot but agree that in the life of nations, education has been used for enslavement, for impoverishment and for subjugation.

Yet, I wish to state categorically that education cannot be but for empowerment. How can this be, in an age where it has become even more apparent with every passing year that as a nation we are impoverished, we are mentally enslaved and we are subjugated? The fruits, if they may be so called of Verwoerdian ideology and its aftermath manifest themselves daily as we continue to be corporate outcasts, political impotents, intellectual phantoms, social schizoids and technological illiterates. Is it then not self-evident that there is education for subjugation?

I say not. Knowledge is perceived reality, a recognition of fact as opposed to fantasy, wish or desire. Man's mind or his brain is his only tool of knowledge – not his heart, not his feelings, not his gut. By his sensory perception man assimilates facts and by a process of thought, of applying reason he conceptualizes and categorises these facts and by using thought, reason, he has acquired knowledge. While the act of perception is involuntary, the process of reason, of thought, is not automatic, it is not involuntary. It is volitional, it is by choice and has to be learned. The process of exercising that volition and the learning of applying thought to fact, is called education.

Only by this process is man able to deal with the physical and social environment around him. Man by nature aspires to liberty, happiness and self –preservation. He therefore uses his knowledge to create for himself an environment that is safe, that he can derive sustenance from, and in which he may achieve self-actualisation. By his knowledge man does not only adapt to his environment. He adapts his environment to suit him.

When the environment becomes inhospitable to an animal species, the animal migrates or becomes extinct. When the environment becomes inhospitable to human species, the human adapts his environment. This he can only do if he has knowledge. Knowledge is acquired by education. Therefore, when pestilence afflicts animals, they perish. When pestilence afflicts man, he develops preventative and / or curative solutions to control and eradicate disease. When scarcity of food afflicts animals, they perish. When scarcity of food afflicts man, he devises agricultural, industrial and lately molecular biology technology to create food. When the animal kingdom is afflicted by predators, the animals perish. When the human kingdom is afflicted by predators, man devises rules, laws and government to render the environment safe. Therefore education is an instrument of power. However, knowledge is power only over the environment, not over other men. Power over other men is derived only by force not by reason. When man exercises force over another man, he exercises power. The difference between a well-educated man and a poorly educated man is not force, it is intellect. Intellect is an instrument of persuasion, not coercion. Therefore an educated man seeks influence and persuasion over other men, not power over his fellow men. The only power he seeks is over his environment.

If one's method of dealing with scarcity of resource is by looting, appropriation and hoarding of God-given resources instead of technology and hard work then are you a people of education? If one's method of dealing with political reality is by use of force and denial of reality (i.e. inability or refusal to apply reason to fact) then are you a people of education? If one's dealing with fellow man is not by measure of one's intellectual worth but by appealing to mysticism and baseness of tribe and race, then are you a people of education?

If an ostensible education system renders you as a people incapable of dealing effectively with reality in your economic environment, in your political environment, in your social environment, then education can it be called? It is not by what you claim for the system nor what you call it but its nature and its effects that you describe an educational system.

Having explored the concept of education and its philosophical base, and of the concept of power and its nature, what more can be said of concepts of empowerment?

Apart from the concept of power itself, the central issue to explore in the concept of empowerment is the locus of action. I wish to address the issue of how and by whom empowerment comes to be. Key to our understanding of this process is the concept of efficacy.

Efficacy is the ability to direct and influence events, a measure of control over one's environment and over one's own fate. However, more important than the ability referred to, is the belief that one possesses that ability. A sense of efficacy is not innate, one is not born with it, it is learned. Before cognitive development man is like an animal in that he lacks a sense of efficacy.

What does a lack of sense of efficacy mean? It means that one considers oneself subject to elements; subject to one's environment; subject to fate; subject to the will of others; subject to Providence. Changes in the environment are determined by forces other than self and one's wellbeing is determined by courtesy of a benign environment or goodwill of others. Therefore one is at the mercy of the environment and others have power over one, and what is unpardonable, one believes it only natural that it be so or is timidly resigned to the fact. We have said earlier in the context of discussing knowledge that the critical difference between man and animal is control over the environment. Man by nature is capable of and should seek mastery over his environment, whereas animals by nature are incapable of even conceptualizing the thought, much less, effect control over the environment. Therefore, a people without a sense of efficacy, a belief in their ability to shape and affect their environment, consign themselves to a status barely above those of animals. Efficacy is a product of education. It is an understanding of cause and effect and the ability to achieve rational objectives and goals. A people without efficacy are reduced to desire without an understanding of the how, much less the ability to satisfy this desire. Therefore, their existence is reduced to wishful thinking instead of purposeful action. In other instances they pursue courses of action that have no rational connection with or that are contrary to their stated goals. A culture of dependency develops in such a people, a culture of poverty, a culture of no self-esteem. No dignity. No pride.

Thus we observe a people that seeks and expects handouts, donations and alms at every opportunity. We observe a people that seeks prosperity by stealing and looting. We observe a people that expects to be taught rather than to learn. We observe a people that deprives others the opportunity to learn and then sanctimoniously gripe about the low levels of skills and unfair burden they carry. We see a people who expect to achieve their freedom through Providence, the military intervention of other or the good offices of foreign powers. We see a people who expects to achieve freedom by denying it to others. We see a people stuck to hackneyed formulae and positions because they have no capacity to analyse or alternatively refuse to apply reason to the challenges at hand. There is no connection in their minds between cause and effect. No efficacy. To cap it all, they are genuinely stymied. They cannot understand why they cannot achieve their desired goals. They blame it on each other, on foreigners, on imperialism, on communism, on apartheid, on fate on Providence.

Efficacy therefore is a crucial element of empowerment because the trademark of a person who lacks efficacy is helplessness. Efficacy is therefore, very importantly, a process of self-empowerment because the power we refer to is that of mastery over environment.

What can we say about Columba Leadership Programme's intervention in this context?

- The Columba Program imbues High School students with a sense of purpose, a personal sense of mission that enables them to focus on their studies with a view of becoming somebody.
- Having been exposed to the programme the Manyangana student leaders for instance influenced performance, leading to the school producing the best Matric results in the Mpumalanga Province (38 distinctions, 5 in Maths).
- The Columba Project is a character and confidence builder. Before its introduction in the Mpumalanga Province students were generally coy to take science and maths as subjects because of the historical high failure rate. Now at a school like Manyangana there is a scramble to take Maths and science as choice subjects.
- A formal survey conducted in the area reveal that:
 - I. 100% attest to measurable impact on their school to an improved culture of learning in the schools.
 - II. 100% attest to a program that is relevant and empowering, which they would recommend to other schools.
 - III. 89% said it made the role of principal and of educators easier **“In the past educators used to think that learners are only recipients. The learners themselves are now able to remind teachers when it is their time to go to class and teach. In the past learners would just make noise when a teacher was not in class at that time. Lately that time is used constructively.”**
 - IV. 95% of parents report positive, permanent changed behaviour in their children.
 - V. 89% of adults / parents are more involved in their children's school life

Clearly, the Columba Leadership Program is transformative in several ways and deserves the support of South Africans of good will.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion I can do no better than quote a leading 19th century black America thinker, Fredrick Douglas, on the issue of self-determination: **“Our destiny is largely in our hands. If we find, we shall have to seek. If we succeed in the race of life it must be by own energies and own exertions. Others may clear the road, but we must go forward, or be left behind in the race of life. If we remain poor and dependant, the riches of other men will not avail us. If we are ignorant, the intelligence of other men will do but little for us. If we are foolish, the wisdom of other men will guide us. If we are wasteful of time and money, the economy of other men will only make our destitution the more disgraceful and hurtful.”**