

Address at the National Teaching Awards Ceremony

25 October 2001

Director of Ceremonies,
Minister of Education and Deputy Minister of Education,
MECs,
Director General and other senior officials,
Distinguished educators and teachers,
Ladies and gentlemen.

I am particularly pleased to be able to attend this important national event for the second year in succession, and thank you for inviting me to this year's awards ceremony.

Perhaps by coincidence, we meet here today in the same month in which World Teachers' Day has been celebrated. We should therefore take seriously the slogan chosen for the Day by Education International and Unesco, which is, "Qualified Teachers for Quality Education".

I am confident that all of us here will agree that these Qualified Teachers for Quality Education should play a central and critical role in bringing a qualitative change and a better life to all our people.

What we are about tonight is important because if we are to attain our goal of a truly people-centred and caring society for the people of South Africa, and, sustained socio-economic development for the entire continent in this 21st century, then we can only do so through the foundation of a strong education and training system that functions efficiently and effectively, because of the contribution made by selfless, committed and excellent teachers.

Certainly, you, the men and women whose responsibility it is to ensure that we produce an educated nation are faced with an enormous task.

This is largely because of the legacy of the apartheid system, which has created a number of social deficits, including the absence of classrooms in some of our areas, lack of proper facilities in many schools in the disadvantaged areas, especially in rural areas.

Accordingly, teaching has to take place in adverse conditions where there is no clean water, sanitation, electricity, or any proper teaching and learning resources.

Yet, despite these daunting conditions, our people have for many years managed to defy the negative odds and produced outstanding leaders in our communities. It is this commitment and selflessness that is needed today, as we seek to ensure that our country and continent fight to overcome the legacy of underdevelopment and catch up with the best in the world.

Clearly, there can be no doubt that our overall success in the 21st century is only possible if we strengthen the foundation for learning and knowledge acquisition laid by many dedicated teachers and educationists in the past. Precisely because it is not the task of government alone to ensure good and efficient education, we have consistently and tirelessly worked for social partnership between government, parents, teachers, learners and the private sector so as to overcome all the challenges we face.

This partnership is an essential aspect of the reconstruction and development programme of our country. It is a crucial part of our transformation agenda.

In this regard, teachers play a central role in the advancement of the transformation of our education system and the strengthening of our abilities to meet the challenges that the new century has placed upon us.

As we are aware, all of us as South Africans must be able to carry out a multitude of tasks in order to develop and transform our country. To do so, we will need the widest possible educational base that embraces both intellectual expertise and the technical skills.

To arrive at this point, requires the setting of high and rigorous standards for everyone. Among others, we will need to improve teacher training, further education and professional development and work to ensure that these well-prepared teachers find classrooms with adequate supplies of resources.

In addition, we have to encourage and reward those teachers that are dedicated, and effectively use their knowledge and skills for the development of our children. Of importance, is the fact that we require continuously to ensure that there is a qualitative improvement in our work. We need new ways of thinking and doing things, the desire to create and innovate, to solve problems, overcome hurdles and succeed in our endeavours whatever the odds.

Perhaps, above everything else, we would need to instil in the new generation the connection between education and communities, thus bringing up young people who are conscious of their responsibilities to help in the development and upliftment of our people and continent.

This selfless devotion both to personal and social improvement must become part of the consciousness of our children and our young people, as a realistic and attractive alternative to individual greed and self-aggrandisement pursued at the expense of others. This selfish approach to things is clearly contrary to the development of the educated, skilled, viable and vibrant communities that we seek.

Thus, it is particularly pleasing that the Ministers of Education through their Working Group have recently brought out a "Manifesto on Values, Education and Democracy" that will have far-reaching effects on education in this country and on how we and future generations view ourselves as South Africans.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Eleven years ago, Albie Sachs, now in the Constitutional Court, wrote a paper entitled "Preparing ourselves for freedom", the contents of which are still relevant today. He makes the following insightful remarks:

"We all know where South Africa is, but we do not yet know what it is. Ours is the privileged generation that will make that discovery, if the apertures in our eyes are wide enough. The problem is whether we have sufficient cultural imagination to grasp the rich texture of the free and united South Africa that we have done so much to bring about. Can we say that we have begun to grasp the full dimensions of the new country and new people that is struggling to give birth to itself, or are we still trapped in the multiple ghettos of the apartheid imagination?" (*Spring is Rebellious*, Buchu Books 1990, p.19)

Sachs later poses the question:

"What does it mean to be a South African? It is something that goes well beyond mobilising people for this or that activity, important though that mobilisation may be." (Afterword: The taste of an avocado pear, in *Spring is Rebellious*, p.146)

Through the Manifesto on Values, Education and Democracy, I believe we have made great progress in answering Albie Sachs's question as to who we truly are as South Africans, towards a definition of who

we are, based on the values instilled through our liberation struggle, our new constitution and values of democracy, social justice and equality.

The new patriotism that we speak so much about will not drop out of the skies, but must be based on the reality of where we have come from, what we have achieved until now and where we know we must go.

This new confidence and belief in ourselves and our abilities, must be understood and enhanced by learners at all levels and throughout the length and breadth of this land. Thus, the role of our teachers become even more crucial to our development as a people.

Today we celebrate the achievements of our teachers not only because of their competence in their specific fields, or how well they teach and transmit this knowledge to their pupils and students, but also because of their community and citizenship role.

We celebrate the work of these teachers who work as activists in community development and as thinkers who encourage learners to embrace humane and democratic values.

These are teachers who encourage learners to practice and locate themselves, their studies, the careers they will choose, in the context of the dignity of all human beings and on community and national development.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Very recently, I visited the deep rural areas of the Transkei. One of the places we went to was a village in Qumbu, called Tsilitwa. To our amazement, here we found young people using computers to learn science and mathematics. Proudly, they told us, they had also formed a partnership with four schools in Great Britain, maintaining continuous interaction with them through the Internet.

Teachers from the area also use the computers to improve their own levels of education.

Here we also found young people engaged in vocational training in various skills, as well as the plastic arts.

I am pleased to say that at the head of these extraordinary processes stands one of your own, a teacher driven by a beautiful spirit of commitment to the youth, his community and our country.

I also mention this visit because we saw with our own eyes the great ability of modern information and communications technology to assist you, the teachers and our country as a whole, to achieve the objectives of qualified teachers and quality education.

I am convinced that we will have to pay greater attention to the issue of ensuring that as many of our schools as possible have access to this technology. Again, we will rely on you, the teachers, to ensure that our youth uses this technology effectively.

I am convinced that the teachers among us tonight, the illustrious winners of these annual awards, like the teacher in Tsilitwa, occupy the front ranks in our struggle to give birth to a South Africa that is truly new and beautiful.

We salute the award winners for their excellence and recognise that here are ordinary people who are doing extraordinary things. Through their leadership, they are illuminating the path ahead for all learners in all parts of our land.

To the Minister, the Deputy Minister and the Department, the teachers and learners, we say thank you for your efforts and keep up the good work!

Your hard work will help us to build the new people-centred South Africa, the new developed Africa, of this, the 21st and African Century.

I thank you.