

## **St John Vianney Seminary (26 October 2018)**

### **Graduate speech**

**“We need both mirrors and windows”**

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Let me begin by thanking the Dean of Studies, Fr Skhosana, for asking me to come and give a speech at this august gathering where we celebrate together with those who are graduating, today. Let me also take this opportunity to acknowledge Arch Bishop Slattery, Grand Chancellor of St John Vianney Seminary, Fr Rector, members of the teaching and administrative staff, students, family members, and guests. All protocol observed. This afternoon, I chose to speak about the changes that are taking place or should take place in institutions of Higher education with the hope that my views will influence curriculum perspectives at this seminary.

Much has changed since 2015 when students from UCT started the #Rhodes-must-fall protest. The #Fees-must-fall campaign that followed ignited countrywide protests and debate on the role of the state in increasing access of students from formerly disadvantaged backgrounds into institutions of Higher learning. Localised campaigns such as #Afrikaans-must-fall (University Pretoria), and the #visual-redress campaign (e.g. Unisa and Stellenbosch) also followed. The latter struggles put a spotlight on the historical privileging of Afrikaans language over indigenous languages and on white dominated portraits in public buildings/ senate halls etc. The decision by the ANC congress at NASREC, in December, last year, and by government, early this year, to introduce a no-fee policy for students from households earning less than R 350 000.00, and to extend government-guaranteed student loans to students coming from households earning between R350 000.00 and R600 000.00 per annum, has largely brought stability to institutions of higher learning. In spite of the positive state intervention, more subtle struggles for authentic transformation in institutions of higher learning continue unabated. The latter focus on what appears to be more structurally embedded issues such as curriculum transformation and diversity. I am thinking here about racial imbalances at the professoriate level, and imbalances pertaining to race, gender, disability, sexual orientation, etc.

People of my generation and our predecessors acquired a colonial education whose purpose and goal was to ‘civilize’ us. Being educated entailed

demonstrating knowledge about dairy farming in New South Wales, Queensland, and Tasmania, in Australia, the wheat growing prairies in Canada, the formation of the first thirteen states in the USA, Pheidippides running from the battlefield of Marathon to announce Greek victory over Persians, Marco Polo's journey along the silk route to China and Mongolia, Eskimos and their igloos on the North pole, among others. We learnt about the British Constitution, the American and French revolution, Roman art and sculpture, Greek philosophy, the Berlin conference, etc. For literature, we read William Shakespeare, Lord Alfred Tennyson, Alexander Pope, Samuel Beckett, Thomas Hardy, Charles Dickens, etc.

It would be disingenuous, however, to claim that we were not taught some African history or African literature. Indeed, we were taught the history about the rise of the Zulu nation (South Africa), the Bambatha rebellion (South Africa), the Ndebele and Shona uprisings (Zimbabwe), the Nama rebellion (Namibia), the Maji-maji rebellion (Tanzania) the Chilembwe uprising (Malawi), the Mau rebellion (Kenya), etc. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* was also prescribed as a set-book for Literature, and we enjoyed it so much.

However, the down side of the African history we studied was the fact that, its writers were invariably white colonial administrators and/or euro-centric historians and chroniclers who approached their subject in ways that sanitized rather than critique imperialistic machinations. They got away with murder as they went out of their way to glorify colonial successes in Africa, and to demonise and denigrate African dissent and resistance. In their fascination with African rebellion, these historians portrayed the 'rebels' and their supporters as bloodthirsty demagogues operating under the clutch of superstition and the manipulation of 'witchdoctors'. As much as this history eulogised 'African collaborators', it exonerated Western imperialism from imperial guilt. In essence, it was designed to make Africans live in awe of the white person and to make them appreciate the superiority of western genius and technology, especially the martini and the Maxim gun.

What was woeful about this curriculum was that, it was not designed to unlock our potential as Africans as agents of change in Africa. The history that we studied did not have us in mind. It did not help us to contextualise our African condition within an intricate web of exploitative, parasitic and disempowerment relations with the West. Thus, 'civilisation', understood in this sense was synonymous with colonial containment, and domestication. It was, indeed a warped sense of 'civilisation'. Through colonial containment and domestication, we were being moulded into servile subjects for a system where we were to

function as hewers of wood and drawers of water. With this form of ‘education’, which I call ‘education for domestication’, we were being prepared to serve the interests of our erstwhile colonial masters faithfully, and expected to remain eternally grateful for having become ‘civilised’. Clearly, any imitation of such a curriculum must be rejected at all costs, and its place taken by a new one that aims at transformation.

To explain my vision about a transformed curriculum, I will borrow Emile Style’s metaphors of ‘mirrors’ and ‘windows’ in curriculum designing. She uses ‘windows’ to refer to pedagogical resources and texts that afford the student a view into someone else’s culture, reality and experiences. In addition, the metaphor of ‘mirrors’ refers to pedagogical resources and texts that reflect and recreate the student’s culture, reality and experiences and thus help him/her understand him/herself. (Cited in Rudine Sims Bishop, “Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass doors,” *Perspectives* 6 (1990):9-12). According to Bishop (1990), when students gaze through pedagogical windows, they begin to see the similarities of human experience that all people share. Logically, the student is only able to make comparisons because they know themselves, first, via mirrors held up to them. “When you just have mirrors, your world view lacks the beauty of a wide range of perspectives. When you just have windows, you feel like you do not belong. But when you ...make room for both windows and mirrors, a rich, diverse, global world reveals that there are multiple ways of being” (<https://samkanescorner.wordpress.com/2013/03/30/what-are-windows-and-mirrors-and-w...2018/09/13>).

The colonial curriculum that my generation had to endure was overly Euro-centric and offered us a window to learn and appreciate the western world and life, but denied us the mirror to appreciate our African world and life. Our African world, our reality, our histories and experiences were sequestered out of the pedagogical and epistemological matrix that shaped the curriculum.

Within the current debate on curriculum change in Higher education some voices are calling for ‘curriculum transformation/reform’. Others however are calling for the ‘decolonisation of the curriculum’. While the differences may be much more than just semantics, I have no appetite to enter the fray vouching for one approach over the other. To demonstrate that I acquired some smatterings of ‘civilisation’ from my education, please allow me to quote a verse from William Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* that says, “A rose by another name would smell as sweet.” I will therefore stick to the term curriculum transformation.

Over the years, however, progressive academics, organic intellectuals,' together with educational policy makers, and indeed black students, have realised that, apart from limiting access to the poor, the underlying problem in universities is that the university sector had become, and continues to be an alienating environment to the disadvantaged Township and rural black student. The latter have become the face of a high failure rate and dropout statistics. A high failure and drop-out rate among black students is but a symptom of a perennial and pernicious epistemic injustice that has characterised colonial education in Africa. If indeed the deeper problem has to do with colonial and apartheid structures of domination, then the way to resolve it is to decolonise the Higher education space by transforming the curriculum and foregrounding diversity. Therefore, curriculum transformation should be guided by the quest to level what has been historically an uneven higher education terrain so that South Africa can have a stable, peaceful, and secure future. Such a future can only be attained based on principles of equality, justice and non-racialism, among others. The legal maxim 'Justice delayed is justice denied' holds true in this case.

For change to occur, our curriculums must be transformed so that the African student emerges from school /university emancipated. In my view, curriculum transformation is a fundamentally soul-searching process. It is an existential imperative for Africa and for South Africa, in particular. Education should be the key for Africa to look herself in the mirror in order to appreciate, groom and love herself. For too long we have looked through the window and enthusiastically embraced western and lately, eastern, exotica, at Africa's expense. The worst indictment against the current curriculum in our universities lies in its paranoid dependence on western epistemologies at the expense of African epistemologies. For Africans to be respected in today's global village there must be a deliberate re-centring of African epistemologies in the curriculum. Through such epistemic centring, Africans will be able to look themselves in the mirror socially, historically, politically, economically and culturally, in order to chart a way to full emancipation. Africans will only be treated by other nations as equals at the global table when they are emancipated and self-loving. Self-discovery and genuine emancipation eschews emphasising the western or eastern other at the expense of the self or the foreign context at the expense of the African context. Education for self-discovery and true emancipation eschews privileging western philosophy, history, geography, theology, etc., over African epistemologies.

The curriculum, at tertiary level, just like at Primary and secondary, must hold up the mirror to African students so that they get to understand Africa's plight

and adverse forces that cast a blight on Africa's development and progress. When they face and reconcile with their own history, culture, politics, economics, etc., and appreciate and identify African stories of suffering, tenacity, endurance, and hope, then only can students properly contextualise, and not mimic or worship, the fortunes and glamour of other nations. With such a curriculum, education becomes a gateway to success, a step-stone for change and a window into a brighter future. With such a transformed curriculum, Nelson Mandela's statement that, "Education is the most powerful weapon you can use to change the world", will ring true.

A curriculum based on a beg-and-borrow approach can only spell danger and doom for Africa. Borrowed epistemologies sit awkwardly on Africans like a dwarf's robes on a giant. They leave Africans exposed to the elements. A curriculum that is based solely on western worldviews and thought forms or solely on African worldviews and experiences is an indictment to African progress. A transformed curriculum must embody both mirrors and windows so that the African student is not only empowered but also equipped to construct a unity out of the conjunctions and disjunctions between the two perspectives.

For African progress, we need both mirrors and windows.

Hearty congratulations to all who are graduating, today.

Thank you!

## **References**

Rudine Sims Bishop, "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass doors," "Perspectives 6 (1990):9-12, in <https://samkanescorner.wordpress.com/2013/03/30/what-are-windows-and-mirrors-and-w...2018/09/13>>.

Shakespeare W. *Romeo and Juliet*.