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# Reflection on Kenton 2007

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In my reflection, I will focus on 3 things:

- the crisis in education;
- the role that the Kenton Education Association can play in nurturing young talent;
- the centre versus the margin in building a discourse of talking across differences.

All the papers presented in these last three days have alluded to the major crises in South African education – whether it be at primary or secondary level; whether it be in the field of language education or that of science, mathematics and technology; whether in school governance or music education. The book by Braam Fleisch, *Primary Education in Crisis*, speaks volumes about the crisis; also Wally Morrow's *Learning to Teach in South Africa*. Both these books were launched at the conference.

Now that we know what we are up against, the questions remain:

What is our role as individuals, as civil society, as educational activists in improving the situation?

Maybe we need to reiterate the question posed by Professor Vithal, who, in opening the conference, asked whether we haven't become irrelevant. How come our research hasn't made a difference in improving the situation? Is this symptomatic of a country steeped in the tradition of studying problems rather than exploring solutions? This tendency results in policy makers not having adequate information about what works and what doesn't. Our research, through joint actions, can contribute towards the aim of *addressing* the crisis.

The second point, which relates to the role of the Kenton Education Association in nurturing talent in research, comes from my own observations in the work that I do in identifying young talent in Science and Technology. In the last three days we saw a lot of talent being displayed by our young researchers working in different disciplinary areas. A wonderful example was presented by the innovative work of two dynamic researchers in Music

Education, both from the Walter Sisulu University. Ms Nolwasi Ndamase presented her work on gender issues in jazz, entitled ‘An investigation into the perceptions and attitudes of female jazz musicians’. Ms Zoliswa Twane delivered an equally thought-provoking piece on music ‘behind bars’, entitled ‘Reflections on theoretical and methodological trajectories from Umtata Prison’. What was striking about Ms Ndamase’s work was the unassuming way in which the protagonist’s music (Simpfiwe Dana) is explored through the lens of the aural and the written, showing how traditional oral forms are adapted to address the very contemporary issue of patriarchy in jazz/society. (In similar ways, during the years of struggle against apartheid, traditional oral forms were frequently used in songs of protest). In the case of Ms Twane’s work we saw the sophistication of an analysis which uses Foucault’s idea of the panopticon to make sense of the experiences of prisoners who continue to engage in music behind the bars of uMtata prison. Through their music, the prisoners are able to rise above the limitations of their prisoner status – they ‘invert’ the imprisoning gaze to which they are subjected.

The last point relates to the issue of insiders versus outsiders *within research*. I suppose the notion of insiders and outsiders is inevitable. We will always have those who are on the margins vis-à-vis those who occupy the centre stage. What is depressing though is that we build such strong borders that we fail to talk across our differences. I would like to relate an incident that happened during a panel discussion which focussed on evidence based research. The exposition of one of the six panellists, who had shared his story about the difficulties of doing queer research, was met with such coldness – no response. Instead of addressing the issues of exclusion he had raised, the audience, in the discussion that ensued, chose to focus its attention on the qualities of ‘good research’ – an altogether ‘neutral’ area of concern. In this way, the researcher’s peers, who could have been expected to provide a measure of understanding for the predicament illustrated – how is the gay researcher perceived within the confines of the school? – clearly refrained from such engagement. On this occasion our discourse – our empathy – as educational researchers had failed us.

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