UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL, SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

Address by
Mr Federico Mayor

Director-General
of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
(UNESCO)

at the opening of the forty-fifth session of the
International Conference on Education

Geneva, 2 October 1996
What makes a good teacher? This is the question we asked children from all over the world through the Associated Schools network. Replies - in the form of written texts or drawings - flooded in from about 50 different countries. The children put their hearts into their answers, and what they told us is that the teacher-pupil relationship is an emotional relationship, that teachers must love their work and love their pupils, that they teach by example and that they are guides to life as much as to knowledge.

It is to these teachers that this session is dedicated. But I would also ask you to ensure, in your own countries, that they have the freedom, the resources and the influence they deserve. It would be unthinkable for us not to take this historic opportunity of revitalizing the role played by teachers by recognizing its fundamental importance.

Mr President,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to be with you to open the proceedings of the forty-fifth session of the International Conference on Education. Firstly because, once again, the international community has gathered together for what promise to be useful discussions on a theme of considerable importance for the future. And secondly because we will have the opportunity to pay tribute to the memory of three of the greatest educators in history - Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, Jean Piaget and Célestin Freinet - and to make an active commitment to stand beside the teachers of today and tomorrow.

I should first of all like to express my warmest thanks to the Swiss Federal authorities and to the authorities of the Republic and Canton of Geneva for the hospitality they have been offering to this Conference ever since its first session and also to the International Bureau of Education. I should also like to pay my respects to Mrs Brunschwig-Graf, Counselor of State and head of the Swiss Delegation, and to the authorities of our host country. Madam, your support exemplifies Geneva’s lively attachment to its vocation as an international city, as it continues to set the scene for important events in the service of peace, co-operation and development.

It also gives me great satisfaction to see a great many ministers and vice-ministers among our number. Their participation confirms not only the importance of our agenda but also the unique character of this forum for international exchanges of views on education.

I should like to welcome the representatives and observers of non-Member States, United Nations agencies, intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations and, more particularly, the representatives of the teachers’ organizations that have been closely associated with the preparations for this conference. I should like to take this opportunity of stressing the need, now more than ever, to demonstrate our ability and our determination to work together in co-ordinated partnership.

I should like once again to offer my thanks and congratulations to the Council of the IBE and its Chairperson. Mr Bakary Tio Touré, Ambassador and Permanent Delegate of Côte d’Ivoire to UNESCO. After the forty-fourth session of the International Conference on Education, the council continued to adopt an innovative approach to organizational matters, wishing continually to increase the opportunities for dialogue and to make it possible for
dialogue to lead to firm decisions and agreements. Among the most important innovations introduced by the Council, I feel I must mention in particular the regional consultations, which have involved more than 200 experts in the work of preparing the documents submitted to the Conference. This wide-ranging involvement at the regional and subregional levels has brought out the great diversity of situations obtaining today. We tend to see teachers as forming a homogeneous group; that is far from being the case. There are many areas in which differences are apparent: some teachers have scarcely finished their compulsory schooling while others have been trained in universities; some have to deal with several levels of education at the same time while others are able to concentrate on highly specialized tasks in a particular discipline or function; some have access to the most up-to-date communication technologies while others are totally isolated and cut off from the outside world. Some have the respect of their pupils while others work in a climate of fear, violence and even hatred. However, despite such diversity, one thing remains certain: teachers are the keystone of the educational process and it is on them that any reform of education will necessarily depend.

To say that teachers play a key role in changing education may seem to be stating the obvious. But I must remind you that plans for educational reform in recent decades have all too often been designed around priorities that did not include teachers, with consequences that are familiar to us all. In the same way, now that new communication technologies are revolutionizing all kinds of procedures and areas of activity, some people are tempted to place technical equipment at the centre of the educational process. That is quite wrong: though electronic devices can make a splendid contribution to education, they remain an instrument. It is the teacher who continues to be at the heart of the processes of learning and social transformation.

The deterioration in the working conditions, training and status of teachers in many countries has made them less interested and less capable of participating in educational reform. This erosion of their involvement and commitment, which can sometimes develop into indifference, poses a real problem today. Teachers are not necessarily either victims or culprits. Their responsibility, which is admittedly great, must be shared by all those who contribute to the education of children, that is to say, by everybody in both private and in public life. Education, like educational reform, is not just the business of the ‘experts’; it is everybody’s business. I sincerely hope that this session and the forthcoming celebration of International Teachers’ Day will help everyone concerned - not just the public authorities, but also businesses, political parties and circles, the media, heads of households, intellectuals and last but not least the educational community itself - to recognize the urgent need to improve teachers’ status. Children and their teachers represent our only chance of rising to the challenges of the next century.

[The Director-General continued in English]

Mr President,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Our discussions at this forty-fifth session of the ICE are centred on four main aspects of the problem: improving the professional profile of teachers and their social status; adapting the initial and career-long training of teachers to the demands of their increasingly complex task; incorporating the new information and communication technologies into education practice; and ensuring that teachers participate in the management of educational change in partnership with other social actors.
The professional status of teachers is not an acquired fact. Yet we need to be quite clear about this. We cannot continue to make teachers responsible for the training of young people in the ethical, civic, economic and cultural spheres while reducing their role to that of carrying out decisions they have had no part in taking. Professionalization implies a certain autonomy of decision-making. At the same time, and the point must be made with equal force, autonomy implies accountability for the results achieved.

The second aspect concerns training. This is a subject of much debate. Should the main emphasis be on disciplines or on teaching methods? Should training be provided through lectures or should more importance be given to innovative and practical approaches? What should be the relationship between initial and in-service training? Who should train teachers - education specialists or more experienced teachers?

There is, of course, no single, universal answer to such questions. One thing is however clear: training should be focused on the development of skills that equip teachers to respond to the increasingly numerous and varied demands placed on them by society. One of the purposes of the Reference Package for Teacher Education which UNESCO will be launching here in Geneva on International Teachers’ Day on 5 October is precisely to provide guidelines to some of the new methodological and ethical challenges facing teachers at this time of multiple transitions.

In this context, it should be noted that education cannot be required to train individuals who are creative, tolerant, civically and ethically aware and respectful of the environment if these same skills and capacities are not found in teachers themselves. Indeed, the demands made on teachers - as the discussions preparatory to this Conference highlighted - are increasing personal in nature. Teachers find themselves assessed not only in terms of their knowledge and purely technical skills but also for their personal qualities. Or, to be more precise, the personal qualities of teachers are seen more and more as a main technical requirement for the exercise of their profession. This is obviously a key issue now and for the future.

The third aspect - new information technologies - cuts across all the other topics of discussion. These technologies are often seen either as a threat or alternatively, as a panacea. Here it is important to maintain a balanced viewpoint. Clearly - as underlined in the report of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-First Century which you will have the chance to debate this afternoon with its President, Mr Jacques Delors - the integration of new technologies can promote more effective learning and provide pupils with access to knowledge and skills not available in their local environment. However, we must avoid adopting a narrow, technocratic approach to the new technologies. As I have already emphasized, they are instruments at our service, to be wisely used by teachers. The quality of the messages they convey - whether they serve as a bridge between the industrialized and developing countries, whether they are vectors of tolerance, solidarity and justice or conversely of cultural domination - does not depend on technology itself but on the human input. The new technologies have enormous potential - not least for reaching the educationally unreached, for including the vast numbers of excluded people in the world. However, the responsibility for the way this potential is employed is a social and political one.
Mr President,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

The present conference will enable us not only to learn about different national experiences but also to share opinions, debate controversial points and open up questions that need to be explored further. The debate will indeed continue, and UNESCO is already preparing future meetings that will develop the work of this Conference on specific themes. In this connection, let me single out the Conference on Technical and Vocational Education to be held in Seoul in the next biennium, which will enable us to analyse in depth a sector of education vital for future economic and social development.

[The Director-General concluded his address in Spanish]

Mr President,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

The session of the International Conference on Education is being held in an exceptional year for education, as it marks the centenary of the birth of Jean Piaget and Célestin Freinet as well as the 250th anniversary of the birth of Pestalozzi.

The name of Jean Piaget is intimately associated with this city of Geneva, the International Bureau of Education and UNESCO. As you will remember, Piaget - together with his friend and colleague the Catalan Pedro Roselló - directed the International Bureau of Education from 1929 to 1968. His enormous contribution to science often makes us overlook his public activities. We must remember that Piaget remained throughout his life personally and intellectually committed to international co-operation in education.

All the different facets of his life and work are being illuminated throughout this anniversary year. Here I should simply like to draw attention to his dual role as scientist and politician. As director of the International Bureau of Education and, for a short time, Member of UNESCO’s Executive Board, Piaget made it quite clear that for him scientific reflection and public action - in the context of international co-operation - were not separate activities.

It happens that the centenary of the birth of Piaget coincides with that of Célestin Freinet and with the 250th anniversary of the birth of Pestalozzi. The contributions of Pestalozzi and Freinet, allowing for the obvious and significant differences of period and cultural context, demonstrate the importance of allying scientific knowledge with a political commitment to the democratization of education. Pestalozzi, the ‘father of the poor’ and Freinet, the militant pedagogue, showed that the crux of all educational theory is how it can be used to resolve the problems of learning for the socially most disadvantaged population groups, for the marginal and excluded.

The year 1996 also marks the thirtieth anniversary of the ILO-UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Status of Teachers. This Recommendation has inspired a large number of national policies and UNESCO activities, always carried out in close co-operation with the International Labour Office and with teachers’ unions, especially Education International, whose representatives at this Conference I should like to salute.

The results of this forty-fifth session of the ICE will certainly give fresh impetus to national policies and international co-operation. UNESCO commits itself here and now to making co-operation to promote a comprehensive policy on teachers one of the basic priorities of its programme. The principles of our Organization’s medium-term strategy are based...
precisely on the strengthening of professionalism, mastery of the new information and communication technologies and in the renovation of theoretical and practical training. All that is to be set within the general framework of the role of education in the building of a culture of peace which is, in fact, the ultimate purpose of UNESCO.

Mr President, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The report of the Delors Commission, to which I have already referred, identifies four pillars which as you all know form the basis of teaching: learning to be, learning to know, learning to do and learning to live together. I would like to add a fifth, which seems to me of particular relevance nowadays - learning to take the initiative. Because schools - and more particularly universities - must produce the managers and business people of the future; because the momentum of the period in which we are living requires graduates - who have had the privilege of receiving the best education in the country’s best institutions - to contribute to the creation of jobs and to the well-being of their fellow citizens. Learning to take the initiative is learning to take risks.

I like to quote that chilling remark of Albert Camus: ‘I despised them because they were capable of so much yet dared so little’. Risk-taking without knowledge is dangerous but to acquire knowledge without being prepared to take risks is useless.

As you know, education means, broadly, ‘to develop or improve the intellectual and moral faculties of a child or young person by means of exercises, examples, etc.. Etymologically it is related to induction, conducting and seduction, with the idea of encouraging docility and obedience.

However, it would be difficult today to see education as docility or submission to the judgement of other people. On the contrary, education should be - must succeed in being - almost the opposite: it should forge the character and intellect of a human being and make that person sufficiently autonomous to be able to reason and decide with the maximum freedom, to achieve that ‘individual sovereignty’ which is, in the end, the most important of all forms of sovereignty.

We are living in an age of many doubts and few certainties. We are exactly on the meridian of freedom, right on the dividing line between light and dark. It is precisely on that dividing line between enlightenment and doubt, on the edge of a precipice with our future wrapped in mist that we are always standing. We have to decide for ourselves, to plan our own future rather than buy it ready-made from demagogues or sects. We must give all young people the chance to develop and trust in their own awareness. Only then will we be able to avoid such deplorable events as the invasion of a United Nations residency without sufficient protestations, the execution, without judgement, of a former president and torture inflicted in the name of justice and laws based on texts that deserve to be put to another purpose. How is it possible that, even in advanced countries, in countries in the vanguard of development, party leaders who say that human beings are not genetically equal are tolerated? This is an incitement to racism, to xenophobia and to social divisions based on skin colour, religious beliefs or gender differences. How can we allow all this to happen? Why? Because it has been too common for educational processes to possess the necessary tools but to overlook the family. Children have been given many toys but have lacked the affection and guidance of their parents. They have been to school but there have not been enough teachers to give them the individualized education that is so necessary.
We must invest in education, we must invest as this century draws to a close if we really want to make the great transition from a world of violence and war to one of peace and dialogue. We cannot simultaneously pay the price of war and of peace. We must decide once and for all to take action against violence. There will always be differences. Not only are cultures distinct, but each one of us is distinct from others at each moment of our lives. Each one of us is unique at each moment of life. That is why we need educators, and I am delighted that this meeting of ministers, preceded by a meeting of experts, is focused on major problems of professionalism, participation and solidarity. This will contribute to an integral approach to the work of educators and teachers at all levels who teach young people to observe that fundamental article of the Universal Declaration which states that all human beings are free and equal and then adds that ‘Everyone has the right to education’.

Yes, education is the hub of the ‘interactive triangle’ represented by peace, development and democracy. There can be no peace without development, and no development without social justice. Only education will make it possible to slow down population growth, safeguard the heritage and environment and give a ‘human face’ to progress; to encourage all citizens to take part in public life and to secure peace through tolerance, respect for human rights and international co-operation. This is the only way of reducing the imbalances and disparities that pose a serious threat to our common future.

Conscious of the importance of looking ahead, the founders of the United Nations system anticipated many of the negative trends we are having to deal with today. That is why the Constitution of UNESCO observes that the achievement of the justice, peace and freedom to which the Organization is committed cannot be founded - and here I quote the exact words of our Constitution - ‘exclusively upon the political and economic arrangements of governments’ but requires ‘the intellectual and moral solidarity of mankind’. That intellectual and moral solidarity can only be forged by teachers, inculcating principles and moral values that will help us to combat the anti-values so often promoted today. Teachers form the vanguard of this solidarity, are the very embodiment of this hope, because they have the power to forge future generations by using the only really reliable teaching method: one based on love and example.