

**Second Annual Julius Nyerere Memorial Lecture
Presented by Dr Rosa Maria Torres Del Castillo in 2005**



Biography of Dr Rosa Maria Torres Del Castillo

Dr Rosa Maria Torres Del Castillo was Minister of Education and Culture for Ecuador in 2003. She is a specialist in the area of basic education, with wide teaching, research, and technical advisory experience. Over the past twenty years she has lived, studied and/or worked in five countries - Ecuador, Mexico, Nicaragua, the United States and Argentina - and has conducted technical missions in most Latin American and Caribbean countries as well as in many African and Asian countries.

She was the Pedagogical Director of the "Monsignor Leonidas Proaño" National Literacy Campaign in Ecuador (1998-1990). Most of her international experience in the field of education is linked to UNICEF and UNESCO. She was Senior Education Adviser at UNICEF Education Cluster in New York (1992-1996); Program Director for Latin America and the Caribbean at the WK. Kellogg Foundation, based in Buenos Aires (1996-1998); and Researcher at IIEP-UNESCO Buenos Aires (1998-2000). Since 2000 she has been acting as a researcher and international education adviser, working from her own institute, Instituto Fronesis. She has coordinated the network of signatories to the Latin American Statement for Education. At UNESCO's invitation, since 2000 she has served as a member of the Jury for International Literacy Prizes. She is the author of over 15 books and numerous articles. Between 1990 and 1998 she wrote a weekly column on education in El Comercio, in Quito.

**MAKING SAFER SCHOOLS:
SCHOOLS IN COMMUNITIES**

“Schools are only one of the learning systems that exist. Learning systems include families, communities, and workplaces. For schools to function effectively they must work with the other learning systems”, said Dr Rosa Maria Torres, previous Minister of Education of Ecuador and colleague of the great Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire. She was the guest of Professor Brian O’Connell, Rector of the University of the Western Cape. She came to deliver the annual Julius Nyerere Lecture on Lifelong Learning. She addressed a packed audience, which included the High Commissioner of Tanzania and the National Minister of Education, Naledi Pandor.

At a meeting organised by the WCED, she addressed over 200 rurally based school principals. Dr Torres emphasised that functional schools were dependent on understanding themselves as part and parcel of the community. As she said, “The school is in the community and the community is in the school”. She gave several examples from around the world to show how schools had responded to needs in their communities. One example came from the Caribbean island of Granada. Soon after popular leadership came to power, and before the USA invaded the island, there was a decision to close the schools for a day in order to train the 60% under-educated teachers. The parents and others in the community understood the importance of teacher training but they did not want their children to miss out on a day’s schooling every week. They therefore decided that the members of the community would run the school every Friday. The curriculum was redeveloped based on the various skills that parents could teach. For example, some parents came and taught cooking, basketwork or motor mechanics. Parent organisations sprang up to arrange a variety of excursions.

Dr Torres explained that this arrangement had a number of unintended consequences. Teachers started to value the parents and other community members. Parents understood and appreciated the teachers more. Parents had to think about what it is they know and can teach. Children were proud of their parents. The schools and their communities began to function more closely and everyone recognised the importance of working together. Communities defended the schools as they had become `theirs`.

Another example came from rural Mexico, where no teachers wanted to teach in the remote rural villages. So 35 years ago a system of `community instructors` developed. Young school leavers are contracted to do community service in the villages for two years. They are given excellent training and the community houses them. As community instructors they have to teach children at all levels in the morning and later in the day they teach literacy to adults. There are now 80 000 of these instructors and they are highly successful. In a study to find out what helps them succeed, they found that they are highly motivated as the government gives them a 5-year scholarship for university when they finish. Many of the community instructors decide to train as teachers and many of them found their work in rural communities so satisfying that they have chosen to go back when they are trained. The schools and the instructors are very much part of the local community.

The question was posed as to how principals help to get community support for schools. Dr Torres told how so many schools in Latin America only speak to the parents when they want something. They seldom contact parents if their children are doing well, its only when there is a problem. She emphasised the importance of the schools finding out what they can do for the communities. It is essential that schools see themselves as in the community, not separate from it.

One principal told of vandalism that the school faces that it is very difficult to open their schools to communities. Dr Torres then told a story of the Salesian Order which opens their schools to the community every week-end. People use the schools for weddings, picnics, or sports. Through this regular use of the schools, the communities see the

schools as their own. Even in very poor neighbourhoods, where crime is high, the schools are not touched but this is because the priests who run the schools are close to surrounding communities.

Making schools safe is not a problem for the schools alone. Schools are part of other learning systems. They are dependent on what is happening at home, in communities and at work. They are enmeshed in economic and social policies and subsequent realities. Dr Torres suggested that it is through close collaboration with politicians, local government, employers, community organisations, students and parents, that local solutions can be developed. Local communities need to understand how economic and social policies can impact them and the functioning of the schools. Dr Torres stressed that there is no one answer, as the local cultural contexts must be taken into account. But examples from around the world show that the more schools are integrated into communities, the more communities defend the schools, and the safer they are.

Shirley Walters
UWC
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