

One Weapon

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Richard Wright, in his autobiographical novel *Black Boy*, recognized the power that words have. After reading *A Book of Prefaces* by H.L. Mencken, he was amazed at the courage it must have taken for Mencken to write powerfully, recognizing that Mencken was “fighting with words. He was using words as a weapon, using them as one would use a club” (Wright). Wright also wielded words as weapons, provoking his readers to question society’s traditions and to envision a world without racial and economic injustice. He knew that words could motivate and move people more effectively than any weapon could.

Similarly, Nelson Mandela once said, “Education is the most powerful weapon that can be used to change the world.” Mandela was a man who knew how to brandish this weapon, believing that words and ideas have the power to transform the world. Beyond his own intellectual mastery, Mandela taught other people how to use their own weapons. From his childhood, Mandela took advantage of the education that was offered to him, attending Fort Hare, the highest level of learning available to him and studying to become a clerk, the highest profession for a black man during Apartheid in South Africa. When he was older, he put his education to use and joined the African National Congress, leading strikes and boycotts, fighting to make education available to all children. However, after being arrested for leading a strike, he was sentenced to life imprisonment. Yet, even while in jail for 27 years, Mandela sought to improve himself through education, earning his Bachelor of Law degree through a program offered in the prison. He spent 67 years fighting for equal rights and died at the age of 95, having lived a satisfying life by passing the knowledge he gained onto the next generation.

Education is a weapon, but just as a person can own a sword, he must also know how to use that sword. If an individual can’t make the leap from getting an education to acquiring actual knowledge that he can use in self-defense and the defense of others, this weapon is essentially useless. Mandela was a man who was able to use education to change our world and our generation needs to follow his lead. Today, the world is facing economic crisis, war and declining trust in governments to solve problems. I encourage my peers to take advantage of the education that we receive and use it. That may mean sharing our knowledge with others through speeches or the media or even becoming a part of the government itself. Education is a vital step in learning about our world: how to survive in it and how to improve it. We should fight to make higher education more available to youth. We should battle to decrease the price of college in order to prepare our future generations. We should wield our honed blades of knowledge with the intention of making a change to this world in which we live.

Student last name Grove

Student first name Elisabeth

The morning of October 9, 2012 was innocuous enough. The girls of the school in Mingora, Afghanistan took their exams then boarded the bus to head home. But as they rolled through the Swat Valley, with the girls singing and chatting happily in the back, a masked man boarded the bus. His hand shaking, he yelled, "Which one of you is Malala?" The girls were silent, but side glances gave her away. The man raised his gun and fired twice; the first bullet hit the 15 year old girl's shoulder, the second entered through her left temple and exited down her neck. As word of the attack spread, the world prayed for the survival of this girl who had stood up to oppression and said that girls also have the right to be educated.

Nelson Mandela understood that education could raise standards of living, prevent conflicts, and impact generations to come. Narrowing gender disparities in education extends this promise to girls; with that, education has the potential to change the world.

Today, 65 million girls across the world don't go to school, and of these, 17 million will most likely never go. A World Bank study found that every 1% increase in the proportion of women with secondary education boosted a country's annual per capita income growth rate by about 0.3%. Additionally, girls with an extra year of education can earn up to 20% more as adults, as compared to their uneducated counterparts. In the Sub-Saharan African country of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which has the lowest per capita income in the world at just \$400 a year, the potential benefits of educated girls are substantial - both to the prosperity of families and to the country as a whole.

Furthermore, the social benefits of educating women cannot be ignored. Separate studies conducted in India and Bangladesh have found that as the rate of education among girls increases, incidents of domestic violence and female genital mutilation decrease. A 2001 study from UNESCO also reported that educated women were almost three times more likely than illiterate women to attend political meetings and be more involved in community decisions.

Most importantly, the investment in girls' education pays dividends. A 2011 UNESCO report showed that children of educated, literate mothers were twice as likely to survive past age five than those whose mothers were deprived of an education. Educated girls also tend to marry later, have 2.2 fewer children, and send their children to school at twice the rate of their uneducated peers. These statistics point to the fact that bringing 65 million more people into the educated fold of society can bring major social and economic benefits. But, perhaps it is best to leave with the story of Malala. After being shot in the head by the Taliban, she spent 10 days in a coma. But when she woke up, Malala vowed to continue to fight until every last girl had the opportunity to pursue their educational aspirations.

Student last name Moylan

Student first name Alice

Nelson Mandela believed in the philosophy of Ubuntu, which is the idea that all humans are connected to one another and should therefore strive to understand and care for one another. Knowing this, it may seem strange that he would encourage the use of a “weapon”, traditionally thought of as an object that inflicts physical damage. In this quote, by using the word weapon to refer to education, the acquisition of knowledge, Mandela suggests that the use of education, and the understanding of the world that it brings, to solve problems would make other forms of weaponry obsolete.

I believe that education brings an understanding of fellow human beings that is discouraged when physical weaponry is used, and thus allows us to change the world in positive ways. The use of weapons necessitates the dehumanization of the weapon’s targets. Those with political beliefs, religions, or heritages are transformed by the weapon user into objects to detract from the reality of harming another human being. Education on the other hand, is expands students’ view of the world. Through our study of literature we gain insight into the experiences of others, through our study of history we see how the actions of the past are affecting the present and future, and through our study of science we learn that all nature, all life is fundamentally the same. Mandela, in his quote is telling the reader that if they utilize this understanding of the world and the people in it gained from education they will be better able to enact change in this world.

The 1993 interim South African Constitution read, “there is a need for understanding but not for vengeance”, meaning that the way to recover from periods of injustice or suffering is not to place blame on another, reducing their value, but to understand one other moving forward. Education, although it does look to the past for knowledge, sets the eyes of students to the problems that they see in their own world. Education, in its capacity as a weapon, should not be used to harm other humans but to destroy the entities which are afflicting people of the world. The immense body of human knowledge is waiting for us, and we can use it to solve in new and innovative ways the challenges that our society faces today. From the vaccine for Malaria to the injustice faced by minorities in America to sources renewable energy, education gives us the ability to change our world.

When Nelson Mandela said “Education is the most powerful weapon that you can use to change the world”, he meant that education provides us with the ability to understand our world and one another, and by doing so eliminates the need for weapons that cause us to harm others. Education is the most powerful weapon because it does not destroy, does not harm. Education provides the clear vision that we need to recognize the changes and the abilities that we need to implement those changes.

Student last name Taylor

Student first name Benjamin

Education in the United States is in sorry shape. Not only in terms of low test scores compared with other nations, but also in the general attitude towards knowledge. Teachers often focus on preparing students for standardized testing, not for changing the world. Students now mirror this attitude, motivated by attractive salaries to become investment brokers, lawyers, and engineers. From where will the next generation of caring activists rise? Where will we find the people who care about preserving humanity, the environment, the world? Education is indeed a catalyst for global change, and should equip students today to solve the problems of tomorrow.

The first step towards changing the world is an attitude shift. We are selfish by nature, so we first have to look away from our own interests—namely, our greed—to focus on helping others. As a young child, I discovered that helping others made me happy. Since then, I have not stopped volunteering. My desire to serve others has defined much of my life. My career goal is to enter the field of biomechanical engineering so that I can improve the quality of life of those around me. We are all given talents and skills for a reason: to help others.

The second step is education. Education equips us to help others. Through learning, we realize and develop our strengths so we can understand the world's problems and design effective solutions. History and social sciences could be viewed as facts to be memorized, or as an opportunity to learn about the ethnoreligious background of poor children in northern Nigeria. Problem sets in calculus or physics are not just for a test grade, but are preparation for a future as an engineer designing efficient petroleum substitutes. English essays may seem cumbersome and unnecessary, but are essential to communicating and analyzing solutions. All education is preparation, equipping young men and women to make an impact on the world. Once we accept our role and responsibility as world-changers, education takes on a new meaning. It is truly the powerful weapon with which the world can be changed.

The third step is action. The world-changing weapon of education must be used to be effective. Once we students realize our potential to change, we must act. Nelson Mandela did not fight apartheid on his couch thinking, "Someone else will." Rachel Carson did not raise awareness about environmental problems by saying, "Someone else will." Eleanor Roosevelt did not work to create the UN and solve global problems by sitting around reasoning, "Someone else will." They all stood up and boldly said, "I will." We must do the same. We must all stand up and say, "I am educated, so I can, so I will."

Student last name Watkins

Student first name Zaria

In America, education was acknowledged as powerful when society realized that slavery could not last for generations using physical coercion alone. The shackles had to be transferred from the body to the mind because as Frederick Douglass said "to educate a man is to unfit him to be a slave". James Madison wrote that "the advancement and diffusion of knowledge is the only guardian of true liberty". Access to education is imperative in the fight for freedom and equality in this country because knowledge is not being diffused sufficiently. Educators are faced with the daunting challenge of closing the Achievement Gap.

The Achievement Gap is the persistent underperformance of African American children when compared to their white counterparts on standardized tests. It emerges before kindergarten and persists through all grade levels and reveals itself in discrepant graduation and dropout rates. In 2011, the National Association for Educational Progress reported that only 14% of African American fourth and eighth graders performed at or above proficient levels on national reading tests. African American children are consistently 26 points behind the general population. These test scores are more than just numbers on paper. They are warning signs of adverse life outcomes including higher rates of unemployment, poverty, imprisonment and homicide.

The documentary, *Bring Your A Game* states that "Failing schools lead to successful prison systems." This assertion is backed up by research that has made the connection between low high school graduation rates and incarceration. The documentary further reveals that "for profit prisons are projecting the number of prisons they will build in 20 years based on 3rd and 4th grade reading scores". The National Education Association reports that 80% of inmates are high school drop outs. The lives of both slaves and inmates reveal that education is the key to liberty and freedom. Those without an education continue to live in chains. Inmates do not suffer alone; their lack of education affects us all. It is estimated that if the male high school graduation rate were to improve by just 5%, the annual crime related savings to the nation would be \$5 billion.

Even America, the richest nation in the world, cannot afford to fail in educating our children. The simple truth is that poverty is less prevalent among people with higher education. Education is the great equalizer. We need to declare war using the weapon of education. We need to fight so that the underserved populations have equal access to education. We deserve to live in a world where engaging educational opportunities are extended to all children. All children deserve an opportunity to be successful in the learning environment because education is the best way to combat poverty and guarantee freedom. Education is indeed the most powerful weapon. It is powerful because it is enduring. Beauty, strength, wealth and freedom can all be forcibly removed, but no one can take away knowledge.