

One hundred years of Sisterhood: a History of DSG

This was a talk by Jane Ritchie, Head of DSG Junior School, given to LAHS members on 15 August 2024

In preparing my talk for today, I dipped into Harry Birrell's book, *Evergreen*, a history of the school written to mark its 125th year. This book was a gift from my father when I first took up my post at DSG, 6 years ago, and I am embarrassed to say that I had given it only a cursory glance until this week. It makes for fascinating reading, probably more so now because I have picked up some knowledge of the school and the people who built it during my time there. It was for this reason that it took much longer to write my speech and I will be sure to go back and read it cover to cover this holiday. It was interesting to see that many of the trials and tribulations of principals past were not so different from my own – a shortage of competent staff around 1945, fluctuating pupil enrolments, economic downturns, epidemics and so on. What is remarkable is that the ethos, ideals and values that we strive to uphold today were a part of the school's fabric from the very beginning: kindness, compassion, integrity, academic excellence and community engagement to name but a few.

This year, The Diocesan School for Girls is celebrating its 150th anniversary. From a big dream and the humble beginnings of one building and a mere 20 pupils, the School has turned into a vast and bustling campus, with 500 girls and a waiting list which prompts a discussion about expansion in every Council meeting.

As per the Foreword in Mr Birrell's book, the DSG was founded at a time when education for young women had just begun to be taken seriously by a few women (and fewer men) who could see sufficiently ahead of their own times. It was established in 1874 by Bishop Merriman as a sister school to St Andrew's College, which had been founded nearly 20 years earlier in 1855. The driving force behind this initiative was Dorothea Beale, the Headmistress of Cheltenham Ladies College in the UK. She was one of the greatest educationalists and pioneers of her time, who fought for the importance of giving young girls an excellent grounding and education and had foresight of the impact that educating women could have on the world. When she took over Cheltenham in 1858, just four years after it was founded, there were some 50 girls enrolled at the school. By the time she died, still in office, in 1906, there were over 1000 girls at Cheltenham. She managed to disseminate her forward-thinking educational philosophy throughout the English-speaking world. DSG was fortunate enough to have Cheltenham Ladies Old Girls as our first four Headmistresses, with the founding Headmistress being Catherine Espin. It was through these early headmistresses that Miss Beale's educational aims and ideals were injected into the ethos of the DSG.

It is difficult for us to appreciate now, thanks to the development of modern medicine, just how great a health threat was posed to many people born in cold damp climates, who were susceptible to chest and lung problems. Canon John Espin was one such immigrant who moved to the Fair Cape, with his wife Catherine, only to be almost finished off by the wet Cape winters. Catherine, taking the decision to move to a more temperate climate, responded to Bishop Merriman's advertisement for a girls' school principal. Shortly after the birth of Catherine and John's second child, the family moved to Grahamstown, to settle in The Grange. The Grange is a gracious old lady, built around 1830, making her the oldest building on our campus. My daughters and I lived in The Grange for two years while I was a House Director and one of my girls slept in the gun room. The small slits for rifles to stick out at the enemy have been filled in but are still visible in the thick walls. This was where the first 15 or so pupils made their home, along with the Espins. In fact, the girls of DSG were known in the town as Espinites! By all accounts, Catherine Espin was a progressive educator, a compassionate surrogate mother to the boarders in her care and a tireless worker. I was fortunate to hear several of the more recent former heads of DSG speak and be spoken of at the 150th birthday celebrations in May 2024. The incredible commitment of these women and men, to the all-round education and well-being of the girls in their charge was nothing short of inspiring. This is a theme that is recurrent in Mr Birrell's book. The heads of DSG over the ages stand out as revolutionary. Over the years they have been deliberate in their efforts to leave a sound educational legacy, demonstrating progressive and visionary leadership. In my opinion, it is these dedicated educators, demonstrating boundless energy, enthusiasm and the courage to push the boundaries, who see teaching as a vocation rather than a job, that makes a good school great. When Covid struck and our schools were closed, many predicted that the face of education would change drastically and permanently. There are many advantages to having access to online teaching but there is absolutely no replacement for the heart and soul of a school and the people who create a sense of belonging within its walls. If history is anything to go by, the School has the foundation in place to weather the storm. Covid-19 was not the first epidemic the school has seen. In 1935 the school was closed for 2 months due to the Spanish influenza epidemic and it has weathered two World Wars, which impacted the availability of staff and sadly saw many past pupils of St Andrew's immortalised on the walls of the Chapel and the Clock Tower. Despite the challenges, DSG persevered, remaining true to its values, mission and vision. DSG has consistently been a disruptor - adaptable and nimble - and a pioneer in all spheres of education.

In 1974, 100 years after DSG opened its doors, St Andrew's opened its doors to girls. Eric Norton, Head of College at the time, recalls that DSG was having trouble providing continuity in its teachers of Science and the idea of co-instruction with shared classes in Std 8, 9 & 10 was born. Shortly after four girls had joined the College Matric Additional Maths class, the class wrote a test. A boy, who had invariably come top of the class was extremely put out that one of the girls had the

best mark. He said loudly as he left the class, “That’s the last time any bally girl beats me!” Mr Norton remarks that little did the boy know, he had more than met his match. I am pleased to report that this trend has continued and the top of the current IEB matric Maths class is a girl, and leading the pack by a long way in A Level Maths, A level Physics and A level Chemistry is also a girl. I like to think it has everything to do with their Grade 7 Maths and Science teacher, me, but there may be some genetics at play too. One of the first matriculants of this co-instructional project was Margaret Henderson, now known as Margie Keeton. She and her classmate, Ania, earned a full house of 6 A symbols each. Margie served on the DSG Council when I was first appointed as Head of the Junior School and has often remarked that she owes her matric results to St Andrew’s College!

Today, we provide a fully co-instructional programme from Grades 10 – 12 (previously Std 8, 9 &10). There are obvious advantages to the sharing of resources, both human and concrete, eg facilities such as the Science Lab at College and the Music School at DSG. Some of the Grade 8 and 9 classes are also mixed, where subject choices such as French, Mandarin or ICT yield too few pupils from the schools separately, but together make it viable to offer a wider range of subjects. In 2019, the Cambridge A Level programme was introduced. Initially more boys than girls chose this route but this year we had equal numbers of boys and girls.



DSG Chapel and surrounding garden
(Photo supplied by Jane Ritchie)

Surrounding garden
(Photo supplied by Jane Ritchie)

Education has become a challenging space in the 21st century; the rapidly changing world and global socio-economic climate demands adaptability, innovation and above all, a growth mindset enabling one to find the opportunity in the challenges that present themselves.

Key themes among these in recent years are: the need to amplify the holistic approach to education, the duty of care, elevating the importance of wellness; building our community, and equipping pupils with the necessary leadership skills to navigate the world beyond our walls.

As you can see, DSG is not only a school but a home to many. It is a full immersion experience, where the School is involved in all aspects of a girl's education, extending far beyond the confines of the classroom. In a boarding environment, the staff get to know the girl behind the name – what makes her tick, her fears, passions, anxieties, strengths and weaknesses. There are support systems in place to manage the well-being of each child to ensure she meets her full potential during her time at DSG.

The DSG community has always been something quite special with the girls (past and present) often referring to their close bonds as the "sisterhood". DSG's brother schools, St Andrew's College and St Andrew's Preparatory, form part of their extended community and paired with the boarding experience, it fosters a sense of belonging, not only for the pupils but also for the parents as they gather together in the small city of Makhanda for special occasions spanning their children's school careers. The pupils that make up the Family of Schools are diverse, and pupils and parents alike form bonds that transcend cultural, language, geographical and social differences, with pupils and families forming connections that, for the most part, last a lifetime, creating a rich and vast network that provides immense support on a global level both personally and professionally. This is particularly evident in Mr Birrell's book as I skipped through the pages, recognising names of those whose children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren have returned to DSG or St Andrew's to learn or to teach. The community is strong, warm and welcoming.



The combined St Andrew's and DSG choir and orchestra at
Prize Giving. Photo supplied by Iane Ritchie

DSG's mission is to create women of substance - authentic female leaders with a global perspective. DSG strives to prepare and equip each girl in a way that intentionally prepares her to navigate her future and shape and influence it by giving her the tools for change. In this regard, DSG has very specific grade-appropriate leadership programmes and opportunities in place to allow girls to try, fail and take risks without judgment, with the only consequence being learning and, ultimately, growth.

My own philosophy about Junior School education is very simple. I have two goals: one, to create in my pupils a lifelong love of learning. Children learn best when they are having fun and are fully immersed in the learning process. The knowledge they construct for themselves is far more valuable and long-lasting than regurgitated facts from a textbook. To this end, we encourage the girls to explore, experiment and investigate. Our curriculum is flexible and driven by the girls' interest and curiosity. My second goal is to teach children to think critically for themselves. If we can equip our girls to be curious, to strive constantly to 'upskill' themselves, to make confident independent decisions and to take calculated risks, we have done our job well.

I have always seen the children I teach as my own. The Girls in Green, in the Junior School at least, are "my girls". When I consider the quality of the job I have done in educating them, I ask myself the same questions I ask myself as a mother "Have I empowered her to think for herself, to act on her instincts and to practise sound judgement when it most counts? Have I prepared her to be independent, confident

and compassionate? Have I instilled a strong work ethic and a sense of integrity in her? Have I taught her to respect others as well as herself?

I would like to conclude with a video, created by one of the girls, which to me embodies the spirit of DSG and reminds me how privileged I have been to serve in such an institution and even more so, to have afforded my daughters a world-class education at a school rich in tradition and history.



DSG Junior School Head Jane Ritchie (left) with three DSG Old Girls/ex staff members at the talk: Cheryl Craig, Sue Hummel and Jacklyn Cock. (Photo: Sue Gordon)

REFERENCES

Birrell, H. *The History of The Diocesan School for Girls*. 1999