

The Walter Parry Memorial Lecture Series, Stellenbosch University

21 May 2026

Honouring Mrs (Juf) Eva Johnson

Title: Education as Repair: Reclaiming Our Stories, rebuilding Our Future

Prof Benita P Nel, University of the Western Cape

Good evening and thank you for the introduction. All protocol observed.

What a sight it is for us to meet here in the Education Building at Stellenbosch University. I know this space because after I completed my BSc undergraduate degree at this institution in the Science Faculty, I completed my Higher Diploma in Education and my BED (Hons) qualification in the Faculty of Education in this very same building. I remember that, in my Higher Diploma in Education in 1989, there were white learners from neighbouring schools, brought in for the micro-teaching sessions. I was not allowed to partake in it. As a person of colour I was not allowed to teach white learners. I was a mere observer during micro-teaching, although enrolled for the same qualification, and paying the same fees. I did my practice teaching first at what was called at the time, “Lückhoff 2” in Banhoek road and my major practice teaching was done at Lückhoff High in Idasvalley – my alma mater, where I completed the National Senior Certificate (NSC). I was granted the privilege to complete my BED Hons degree specializing in Mathematics Education the next year after completing my Higher Diploma in Education in this faculty, before starting to teach. But, in my Hons year in 1990, being one of 2 students of colour in the class at the time, we had a module entitled, “Vergelykende Opvoedkunde” (Comparative Studies in education). There we, amongst other things, grappled with the issue of how to “equalize” the four different education systems that existed at the time in South Africa: Education for the whites (House of Assembly), Coloureds (House of Representatives), Indians (House of Delegates) and Africans (The Department of Education and Training). An outspoken student from Namibia, remember this was not his country, but in his opinion, had all the answer to this dilemma suggesting that we slow down advancing the white learners’ education and advance the other races’ education a bit faster. How this student spoke, was evident that he did not know or did not want to know how our people were marginalised with all the legislation put in

place to keep us from “catching” up. How we schooled in under-resourced schools, in my primary school at the time we still had the pit toilet system and those who obtained a bachelor pass at the time, were few, not to mention those who went to study further and completed their studies.

I will touch on the following aspects in the lecture: Who Eva Johnson nee Boonzaaier was, Juf Johnson’s Master’s thesis, What Juf Johnson’s Story Tells Us, What does it mean to repair?, Reclaiming our stories, The gap that was created – and what it means for today, What Juf Johnson taught us - beyond the curriculum and I will end of with Rebuilding our future – what the road ahead requires before concluding.

My focus will now be on people of colour, but specifically the coloured community as this was the context of Juf Johnson’s study and the context in which she schooled. Mrs Eva Johnson, also known to us as “Juff Johnson” was our History and General Science teacher at Lückhoff high in the time that I was at high school in the early 80s. She was born a Boonzaaier in Stellenbosch on 20 August 1931. She lived in Stellenbosch until her passing on 17 July 2012. At that time, she was 80 years of age. Her primary school years were spent at the “NG Sending Kerk” School in Merriman avenue, not far from where she stayed in “Seweberge”. She was also a member of the NG Sending Kerk [Dutch Reformed Mission church] until her passing. After primary school, she started her high school attendance at Lückhoff in Banhoek street, Stellenbosch. But this progress to a high school did not happen as a natural transition after primary school completion as is now the case. First of all, she grew up in a time when coloured learners did not all transition to high school. Well, the reason for this is, when she started primary school, there was not a high school for coloured learners in Stellenbosch. Those who wanted to pursue high school, had to attend high schools outside Stellenbosch. Let’s for a moment dwell on this historical reality.

The book of the historian, Hermann Gilliomee, “Nog Altyd Hier Gewees” (2007), gives an outline of the history of the church schools in Stellenbosch and the existence of different church schools in Stellenbosch. This must be understood against the background that the coloured child was not prioritized by the white

government of the time. For a long time, Stellenbosch did not have a high school, but numerous primary schools and these schools were linked to different church denominations.

Stellenbosch had, in no particular order, the “James Higgo (Rynse) Gedenk skool”, The Angelican skool (also called die “Engelse skool”), die “Metodiste skool”, die “Volkskerk skool” and as indicated earlier, the “NG Sendingkerk skool” as well as the AME school in Idasvalley. Children attended school mostly according to the denomination they belonged to. Muslim children also attended church schools. It was interesting last week, when a Muslim colleague told us that she learnt the Lord’s prayer and Psalm 23 by heart in the school. Another reality was that in those days, there was a shortage of qualified teachers. It is said that the teachers mostly taught at the schools where their families were church members of. Remember, in those days teachers could start their training after standard 8 (Grade 10) and complete a 2 or 3 year training qualification at a college. So, some teachers were at the tender age of 18 when they started their teaching careers. In those days - in some churches - the young people could only attend confirmation classes at or after the age of 18. So the teachers in the church schools in Stellenbosch of the time, were also expected to be active members in the church especially where some will attend confirmation classes *after* qualifying as teachers. Thus most teachers would be involved in the Sunday school, in confirmation class, in the youth, etc. The principal of the school in some church schools, was also automatically a church council member. So the teacher was intertwined in the church and knew the parents of the children that they were teaching. The community was closely intertwined throughout the week and weekends. But back to the History portrayed in Juf Johnson’s Master’s thesis.

Juf Johnson’s Master’s thesis

Her Master’s thesis’ aim was “to describe the history of education for non-White populations in Stellenbosch from 1830 – 1963”, limiting her study to Coloured education in Stellenbosch. The period was significant for her “because mission schools were already established by the early nineteenth century and widely attended by Coloured learners”. The starting point of 1830 was linked to the arrival of the first Rhenish missionary, Rev PD Lückhoff, who established the first mission

school in Stellenbosch. The earliest forms of mission school were based on reading, writing and arithmetic. The Bible and catechism were often the only available textbooks at the time. She described education in the period **1715 – 1806** as “primarily driven by religious motivations rather than any broader commitment to intellectual or social advancement”. In later years “the establishment of the South African Missionary Society brought about a degree of organization with clearer objectives, regular teaching schedules and a more defined curriculum, even if still limited in scope”. “Education in this period functioned within a dual framework: On the one hand, it served the interest of the colonial system by promoting discipline, obedience and basic communication. On the other hand, it reflected the humanitarian and religious concerns of missionaries who sought to uplift and transform the lives of those they worked with.

During the period **1806 – 1820** the church in Stellenbosch “functioned not only as a spiritual authority, but also as a central force within the community. It took responsibility for establishing schools, appointed teachers and overseeing the moral and intellectual development of learners”. This signals a very close link between school and church. “The growing awareness of the importance of schooling was evident. “Religious institutions were not simply contributors to education, but were, in effect, its primary providers. This resulted in shaping the experience of learners in ways that would have long-term consequences. Last Sunday I was sitting next to my own mother in church where I for example could hear her singing 6 verses of a hymn without looking at the leaflet at the age of 86!

“From 1839 onwards the state began to play a more direct and structured role in supporting education.” This led to financial support that contributed to stability to schools. However, the expansion of the state-supported education did not eliminate existing inequalities.

Mrs Johnson further added that the “development of primary education for coloured communities in Stellenbosch must be understood as a gradual and uneven process shaped by a combination of financial limitations, missionary initiatives and increasing, though often hesitant state involvement. More importantly, “primary schooling in its early phases emerged through local efforts, institutional improvisation and sustained community pressure”. Why? Because the parents of the time wanted

more for their children not just primary education – education free of over crowdedness, better resourced schools having a more regular funding stream, better maintained school buildings, better paid teachers and better learning materials. The thesis is clear on the fact that “the lack of resources has a direct influence on the quality of education”. At the same time was there a growing awareness of the need for trained teachers capable of teaching effectively. The thesis refers significantly about the role that Lückhoff High school played in the expansion of education in the community. It widened access to high schools.

Gilliomee further refers to the establishment of a high school in Stellenbosch, a history closely linked to Juf Johnson. Here, I hinge on Gilliomee’s thoughts more as Juf Johnson did not allude to her own story in her thesis.

Only in 1935 was the first high school, Lückhoff High, established with 45 learners and 2 classes – standard 6 and 7. Remember standard 6 is now grade 8 and standard 7 is grade 9. The staff of Lückhoff in 1935 consisted of the principal (Mr EJ Moses) and two teachers. At that time the school was in in a temporary building in Andringa- and Muller Street. Requests for higher standards (grades) initially fell on deaf ears. Fortunately, in 1937 there were 39 learners below st 7, 26 in st 7 and 29 in st 8. In 1938 Mr Moses resigned and Mr PJ Coetzee was appointed as principal. The year 1939 was an important year when in January 1939 the new school building was occupied in Banhoek road. Then there were 170 learners altogether. Can you see there was growth in the numbers on a yearly basis? There was a hunger for education. Fast forward, in 1949 the first st 9 class was offered and in the year 1950 those learners were in st 10 – the very first group of coloured learners completing their matric in a Stellenbosch high school! That year also saw the first coloured people being elected to the school committee. They were PG Langeveldt, G Februarie, WT Johnson, P Joshua, A Davidse, D Van Noie and J Vergotini. The first st 10 learners in Stellenbosch’s coloured high school were (drum roll – are you ready!): Asaph Josephs, Norman Pietersen, Stephen Sendin, Henry Cupido and Eva Johnson (at that time Boonzaaier) - 4 males and 1 female. So Juf Johnson was in more than one way a first: Amongst the first learners who completed standard 10 at Lückhoff, but also the very first female to complete standard 10 at Lückhoff. I keep

on asking myself how she managed to achieve that and what her challenges were at the time as the first female completing matric. 1950 – what a year!

Juf Johnson thereafter completed a 3-year qualification at Hewat teacher training college in Athlone and subsequently started teaching at Liebenberg Primary school in Malmesbury. Sy married Mr Johnson in 1957 and in 1958 she took up a teaching post at the NG Sending skool in Stellenbosch – the same school where she was schooled. Some of our best teachers were formed in those training colleges although it might be perceived as a short period for training. In those days, because of the shortage of qualified teachers, the teachers had to teach a wide range of subjects and sometimes more than one grade in one class. They did not have an option as to what to teach. This was the time when a female teacher had to resign when going on maternity leave and had to apply again for a position if they wanted to enter back into teaching. This was also the time when female teachers earned less than their male counterparts.

What Juf Johnson’s Story Tells Us

I left you with a remarkable fact. In 1950, five learners completed Standard 10 at Lückhoff High School for the first time in the history of Coloured education in Stellenbosch. Four young men and one young woman. That young woman was Eva Boonzaaier — later Eva Johnson — the person we are honouring here today.

I want us to sit with that for a moment. 1950. Fifteen years after the school was established. Fifteen years of fighting for higher standards, of requests that initially fell on deaf ears, of learners who had no local high school to attend when Juf Johnson herself first started primary school. And then — five learners. Four young men. And one young woman who refused to be left behind. Juf Johnson told her mother at an early age that she wanted to attend school up to matric! A young girl, daughter of a single mother who was the domestic worker for the Cruse family, became the first female in our community who completed matric at our only high school at the time. The daughter of the Cruse family was also her best friend whom she grew up with. This might be where her insistence on the use of “Suiwer Afrikaans” came from.

We do not know all of her story. We do not know what her mother might have said to her in the mornings before school. We do not know who told her she could do it, or whether anyone told her she could not. We do not know what it felt like to be the only girl in that Standard 10 class, in a world that had not yet made space for her at almost any level. But we know the outcome. She finished. She was the first head prefect also at the school. And then she did something that perhaps tells us more about her character than anything else.

She went back for more.

She trained as a teacher at Hewat College. She taught in Malmesbury. She got married. And then, in 1958, she returned to the very school where she had been a learner — the NG Sending Kerk School in Merriman Avenue — this time as a qualified teacher. She gave birth to three children: Annette, Ian and Neil. Years later she would teach at Lückhoff High, the school where she had broken ground as the first young woman to complete her matric. She became, to learners like me, simply Juf Johnson. History teacher. General Science teacher. A presence in the corridor. Voice in the classroom. One of the people who shaped us without us fully understanding, at the time, the weight of what she was doing.

She was not merely teaching us History. She was making and writing history. She had been making it since 1950. She decided to further her education, a desire that she always had. In 1978 she obtained her BA degree through UWC. In 1981 she completed her Hons degree, through UNISA. I suppose that studying through UNISA suited her context of studying part time and maintaining her full-time teaching position and raising three children as well. These three children I can clearly remember were taught a music instrument. Annette on the piano, Ian and Neil on the violin. As mother she was there at the eisteddfods and other events supporting her children. But, despite her full programme as wife, mother and teacher, she did not stop there: In 1986 she completed her Master's degree in Education at the University of the Western Cape with the title: *"n Krities historiese waardering van die ontstaan en opkoms van Kleurlingonderwys in die Stellenbosse Dorpsgebied tot 1963"*. Again, she bursts through the ceiling – Making – but also writing history even in 1986 in the dark ages of apartheid! A woman of colour obtaining her Master's degree while she

was working, raising children and running her own household. Looking at the title of her thesis, it signals again her passion for history, for education, for our people and for her hometown, Stellenbosch! Nothing can keep a coloured woman with purpose and determination down! This is a story to be told.

What Does It Mean to Repair?

The title of this talk is “Education as Repair”. I want to spend some time unpacking that word — **repair** — because I think it is more radical than it might first appear.

When we think of repair, we often think of something broken being returned to its original condition. A cracked wall is plastered. A torn garment is sewn. A broken bone is set and healed. Repair, in this ordinary sense, means restoration to what was prior.

But there is another kind of repair — the kind that does not simply return something to its previous state but rather, to transforms it. The repaired object is not the same as the original. In a sense, more authentic, more beautiful — because the cracks are not erased. They are honoured. The cracks become part of the story – our story of repair.

I want to suggest to you that this is the kind of repair that education must do for Coloured communities in South Africa. Not a repair that recreate the past, or pretends the cracks were never there. Not a repair that asks our people to simply catch up to a standard set by those who excluded us, as if the exclusion itself were irrelevant to the process of repair. But rather, a repair that takes the broken pieces — the denied opportunities, the inferior facilities, the limited expectations, the silenced and stolen stories — and honours and thus reclaim them as part of who we are, while building something more whole, more just, and more genuinely excellent and beautiful than what existed before.

Juf Johnson's life is an example of this kind of repair. She did not have the luxury of an uninterrupted, well-resourced educational journey. She navigated a system that was not designed for her success. And yet she not only succeeded within it — she came back and offered that success as a foundation for others – like me. She turned

her own story into someone else's possibility. That is repair. I want to say more about this reclaiming of our stories.

Reclaiming Our Stories

The second part of our title is “Reclaiming Our Stories”. And here I must return to something I mentioned at the beginning of this talk.

I told you about the student from Namibia in my Comparative Education module in 1990, here in this building, who suggested that the way to equalise the four education systems in South Africa was simply to slow down the advancement of white learners while speeding up the advancement of others. I said he did not know, or did not want to know, how our people were marginalised.

Let me be more specific about what he did not know. He did not know that the schooling available to Coloured children in Stellenbosch was, for most of the twentieth century, dependent on the mercy of missionary societies and church denominations — not on a government that recognised its obligation to educate all its children equally. He did not know that Lückhoff High School was established in 1935 not because the government planned it, but because the community demanded it. He did not know that requests for higher standards initially fell on deaf ears. He did not know that the first Standard 10 class only graduated in 1950 — while white schools in the same town had been offering full secondary education for decades.

He did not know that a young woman named Eva Boonzaaier completed her matric that year as the first female matriculant in the history of Coloured secondary education in Stellenbosch — and that this was not celebrated in the newspapers, was not recognised by the government, was not held up as a national achievement, because the system did not consider her achievement worthy of recognition.

He did not know these things because our stories were not told. They were not in the textbooks. They were not in the newspapers. They were not in the official record. They lived in the memories of communities, in the minutes of school committees, in the registers of church schools, in the personal recollections of women like Juf Johnson herself. Earlier this week I was asked where can readings of the life of Juf Johnson be found – a typical example of this. It is not document adequately.

To reclaim our stories is to insist that these things be known. To insist that the history of Coloured education in Stellenbosch — with all its struggle, its remarkable resilience, its quiet heroism — is not a footnote in South African history. It is a central chapter.

When we name Juf Johnson tonight, we are doing exactly that. We are saying: this woman's life matters to the historical record. Her achievement in 1950 matters. Her thirty-odd years in the classroom matter. The learners she shaped — who went on to become teachers, doctors, academics, community leaders — they matter. And the community that built those schools, that filled those classrooms, that sacrificed and prayed and persisted through generations of deliberate underfunding and structural exclusion — they matter.

Reclaiming our stories is not nostalgia. It is not about welfare and charity; it is an act of justice. And it is an act of education.

The Gap That Was Created — and What It Means Today

I said earlier that I would return to the question of equalisation. Let me do so now.

The challenge with the kind of equalisation that the student from Namibia proposed — simply accelerating some and slowing others — is that it fundamentally misunderstands the nature of the problem. Educational disadvantage is not a gap in pace. It is a gap in accumulated resources, accumulated expectation, accumulated institutional capacity, and accumulated human capital — built up over generations.

Consider what was withheld from Coloured communities in Stellenbosch alone. For generations, there was no high school. Learners who might have gone further could not or had to attend high schools in other areas while traveling by train, because the institution did not exist in Stellenbosch for coloured learners. There were high schools in Stellenbosch at the time, but not for coloured high school learners. Teachers who were talented trained for two or three years at a college and entered classrooms at eighteen years of age — not because they were incapable of more, but because “more” was not made available to them. Facilities were lacking and

those available, were scarce, and therefore overcrowded. Books were scarce. School buildings were inadequate. And over all of this hung the constant message — spoken through policy, through resource allocation, through social exclusion — that Coloured children were not the priority.

Now consider what that accumulated deficit means. It means that every generation that was denied a complete education produced the next generation with a diminished foundation to build on. The effects are not confined to the individuals directly denied. They ripple forward. They affect the aspirations that parents are able to transmit to their children, the vocabulary in the home, the relationship with reading and learning, the familiarity with institutions of higher education, the professional networks that open doors.

This is why genuine repair cannot be accomplished by simply opening the doors, readjusting pace, and declaring: the system is now equal. The doors being open is necessary — but it is not sufficient. What is needed is a sustained, deliberate, and honest investment in the communities that were most systematically excluded.

And that investment must begin with education. Not education as it was prior — designed to limit, to sort, to prepare some children for hard labour and others for leadership — but education as it could be, and as people like Juf Johnson modelled it in their classrooms every day: education that takes every child seriously, that demands excellence without manufacturing exclusion, that recognises the full humanity and full potential of every learner who walks through the door.

What Juf Johnson Taught Us — Beyond the Syllabus

Those of us who sat in Juf Johnson's classroom in the early 1980s know that she taught us more than History and General Science. She taught us, by her very presence and her very manner, that we were capable of serious intellectual work. She did not lower the standard. She held it high and expected us to reach it.

In a world that had spent decades communicating to Coloured children — through underfunded schools, through overcrowded classrooms, through the industrial

education that was offered in place of intellectual formation — that they were not meant for the highest levels of achievement, a teacher like Juf Johnson was a counter-narrative made flesh.

She was the living proof that a Coloured woman from Stellenbosch, from the NG Sending Kerk School in Merriman Avenue, could excel academically, could qualify professionally, could teach with authority and dignity, could shape generations of learners intellectually. She did not need to announce this. She simply did it. Year after year. In the same town where she was born - in the same community where she worshipped, among the children of the same families she had grown up among.

That is what I mean when I say that reclaiming our stories is an educational act. Because when children see people who look like them, who come from where they come from, who have navigated the same constraints they face — and those people are standing at the front of the room with authority and knowledge and dignity — something shifts. Something, that no textbook can quite accomplish is accomplished. The child sees: perhaps this is also possible for me.

Rebuilding Our Future — What the Road Ahead Requires

I come now to the third and final movement of our title: “Rebuilding Our Future”.

I want to propose that rebuilding requires three things, and that all three are rooted in what we learn from the history we have traced tonight.

“The first is memory.” We must know our history. We must teach it, tell it, document it, honour it. We must name the women — like Juf Johnson — who were first, who came back, who gave what they had received so that others could go further. We must resist the temptation to begin the story of Coloured education in 1994, as though nothing that happened before the democratic transition is relevant to where we find ourselves now. Sitting with my parents in preparing for tonight, I again was in awe as to the rich history we carry. It is all relevant. Every overcrowded classroom, every inadequate building, every teacher who trained at eighteen and gave their whole life to a school in their community — all of it is relevant to understanding both the challenges and the extraordinary resilience of our communities today.

“The second is investment.” Genuine investment — in the schools that are still under-resourced, in the teachers who are still working in difficult conditions, in the learners who are still navigating a system that has not yet fully repaired the damage of the past. This investment cannot come only from the government, though government has an irreplaceable responsibility. It must also come from those of us who have benefited from the sacrifices of people like Juf Johnson. Those of us who sat in those classrooms and were formed by those teachers and went on to universities and professions — we have a debt. Not a debt of shame, but a debt of gratitude that expresses itself in action. In mentorship. In advocacy. In returning, as Juf Johnson returned.

“The third is expectation.” We must hold our children, our schools, and ourselves to the highest expectations — not because we have forgotten the structural barriers that remain, but because we refuse to let those barriers become the ceiling. Juf Johnson did not wait for the system to become fair before she excelled. She excelled within an unfair system, and by doing so she helped to change it. That is what we are called to continue. We must have high expectations for the learners at Lückhoff, Cloetesville, Stellenzicht as much as we have high expectations for our learners attending Stellenbosch Hoër, Paul Roos or Bloemhof. An unequal society we will still have, *maar ons moet 'n hoë verwagting het van ons kinders om die beste te wees wat hulle kan bekom.*

Closing

Education as repair, is not a slogan. It is a practice. It is what happens every time a teacher or a parent refuse to give up on a child. Every time a community fights for a school or for university entrance it should never have had to fight for. Every time we propagate for more learners to take Pure Mathematics and Science as school subjects. Every time a story that was nearly lost is recovered, reclaimed and told.

Let us honour Juf Johnson not only with our words tonight, but with our choices — in our classrooms, in our communities, in our places of worship, in our institutions, in the way we see and serve the children who are sitting right now where we once sat.

Let us repair, reclaim, rebuild.

Reference

Amos, S.D. (2022). Universiteit van die Vlakte. African Sun Media

Giliomee, H. (2007). Nog altyd hier gewees: Die storie van 'n Stellenbosse gemeenskap. Tafelberg.

Johnson, E.M. (1986). 'n Krities Historiese waardering van die ontstaan en opkoms van Kleurlingonderwys in die Stellenbosse Dorpsgebied tot 1963. MEd - UWC

Williams, G. S. Personal communication, 11 May 2026