

EDITORIAL

Female perspective should be taught in school

Last couple of years ago, I participated in a colloquium titled, "Gender Equity in Education," organised by the Human Sciences Research Council and the British Council. It was intended to look critically at the last 10 years of gender equity in education, explore new thinking on gender equity, revive gender activism in education and to design a sustainable implementation plan. The two days of intense work and reflection highlighted the fact that gender equity in South African education remains a significant challenge.

The conference was opened by former Minister of Education, Naledi Pandor, and it was attended by women and men from the education sector – representing government, civil society and research groups. The three days I spent in Cape Town have left me with a greater sense of the enormous contribution made on an individual level by women and men committed to the creation of an equal society. The proceedings had a palpable sense of urgency, and at times evoked intense frustrations and despair.

When women are assimilated into what is essentially a masculine culture that "speaks" the language of gender equity, but does not provide the space or support for real engagement; when they are assaulted each day by horrifying statistics and news reports about the violence taking place both within and outside of schools – who would

not despair? Not to mention that education employees are also confronted with bureaucratic ineffectiveness, which results in an imposed paralysis. An important theme, which emerged during the colloquium was women in leadership positions. As South Africans celebrated the number of women in the new Cabinet, a number of critical questions still remain. Once they are in positions of leadership on the "inside" of institutions, most often women are alone, with no support. They find themselves in an institutional culture, which perceives leadership through a masculine lens – and any deviation from what is considered acceptable is met with accusations of being irrational, unclear and emotional.

As if emotion itself is not appropriate. From where I stand, it seems that no space exists for women to be able to exercise their own brand of leadership. And although that style might differ from men's, it could also produce results.

Another theme was the issue of backlash from men and boys. As has been evident from this column, I support initiatives that are working with boys and young men. However, it must be made clear that work around masculinities should not be at the expense of efforts to advancing women's concerns. While it is important to address violent masculinity amongst young men, it is not acceptable that resources allocated to girl's education be diverted to these projects

particularly since we are still dealing with historical legacies that continue to impact negatively on girls.

The discussions at the colloquium hit home for me when I returned to Johannesburg and a friend, who considered himself to be very progressive, launched a tirade against feminists and gender activists. He claimed that they were responsible for the growing incidence of sexual violence against girls and women. He argued that women's advancement is only possible at the expense of men, and he was also unwilling to speak about the patriarchy that fuels misconceptions of women.

The colloquium reinforced the necessity of establishing and sustaining links between all areas of society and research structures. Any intervention or programme around gender and education, as with other sectors, needs to be informed by theory and practical action. Essential also is that intervention be made on a number of different levels – with teachers; institutions and other structures – in the curriculum context of learners and educators. The urgency at the colloquium extends to all areas of our lives. We need to act and agitate for positive change now. ■

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