

The invisible barriers that keep our children apart

SA Schools Act must be amended to ensure development of anti-discrimination policy, says **Sipho Lombo**

THE opening of former Model C schools posed a lot of challenges for teachers who were used to teaching only one racial group. Many of these teachers have surprised many of us and children speak of them as if they are members of their extended families. This mix of cultures assists in the reconciliation of future generations and peace between all races.

However, the same cannot be said of a minority of former Model C schools. Throughout the year the Department of Education is inundated with stories of the questionable treatment of some pupils in these schools. African pupils have to bear cultural exclusion, continued taunts and negative remarks about the country and government policies. Life is made difficult — to register, mingle with others and even to receive proper education.

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These children continue to suffer silently, for fear of victimisation, while complaining is frowned upon as lack of appreciation for quality education. They have to prove themselves worthy of this new environment. It is no wonder one child referred to this phenomenon as "a tiresome battle against certain teachers, powerful children who may be prefects, rugby captains or their parents. We are reminded that we come from townships and that we are lucky to be here."

The situation at these schools is a bit like having "new wine in old bottles". The schools argue that the government has no right to dictate to legally constituted school governing bodies. They threaten that if the government pushes them too far, they will go to court.

This battle begins when parents seek

admission for their children. The principal and the school governing body often flatly refuse admission to certain children, citing as reasons, "poor English language", "not living in the area" or "late application" — even though it can be proved that the parent applied for admission the previous year. The more a parent pleads his or her case, the harder and angrier the lady clerk becomes.

In a study conducted by Johan Beckman and Nic Karvelas, Stifling Transformation through the Manipulation of Enrolment, they found that when parents apply to register their children, they are requested to submit a host of documents to prove that they reside in the area, only to then be told that the school is full.

They claim that, as a result, many parents who are interested in the best possible education for their children are becoming increasingly frustrated. The attempt to retain the status quo can be ascribed to the existence, in these schools, of deep-rooted prejudices and a fear that African learners will swamp schools and diminish their culture and prestige.

Instead of using the language policy, they concoct new theories about how to assist children who may not be proficient in English. To accelerate their level of English, children are separated into classes according to their proficiency. However, this practice results in children of one race sitting in a separate class.

Other cases deal with schools which refuse to employ a teacher to teach in the language of many pupils. A case in point is the recent one of *Mrs N Nkosi vs Durban Boys High School*. Her long fight for her child to be taught Zulu as a first language eventually paid off when the court found in her favour. I believe she fought for millions of people who see the schools dealing a death blow to their language.

Some of the complaints tell of teachers who are believed to deliberately disregard certain pupils when they want to answer a question. Some claim teachers distort subject matter. For example: "Since 1994, the rand has lost its value because of government corruption."

These issues are confirmed in a study by the South African Human Sciences

Research Council (HSRC), which found that some teachers practise "racism manifested in rhetoric, name-calling and stereotyping labels".

It further found that children suffer "anxieties in the classroom, corridors, playgrounds and extracurricular events. Many pupils try to trivialise incidents, others are resigned to them".

Every year attorneys of parents have to deal with cases in which pupils are suspended or expelled without following proper disciplinary procedures. Some of these cases relate to children having different cultural backgrounds and a possible lack of knowledge, while others include conflict over cultural adornment or religious attire.

There have been instances where a parent is called and informed by the school clerk that, for example, "Sganga

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has been suspended pending an investigation" without the parent having had any previous notification of the child's perceived mischief.

The child then stays at home waiting for the hearing of the case while the parents plead for the child to go back to class and eventually request the intervention of education officials or attorneys.

In many instances, such schools do not show commitment to achieving a racial mix of their teaching staff, even though the pupils may be predominantly African. What is interesting are the lists of requirements in advertisements for, for example, Xhosa, Zulu or Sotho language teachers. These can include knowledge of swimming, ballet, hiking and piano.

In these and many other subtle, yet traumatising ways, children are exposed

as guinea pigs of transformation. The sad story about all these issues is that there is no attempt to reconcile pupils of different racial backgrounds, and this blemishes the sterling work and results being produced by many other multiracial schools all over the country.

Considering the research by the HSRC and other agencies, I feel that it is time that the law is applied to stop such situations. These schools are missing out on the enrichment and cultural diversity that racial integration can bring to them.

They need to be reminded of the Bill of Rights, as espoused in Section 9 subsections (1) and (2) of Chapter 2 in the constitution which provides that: "Everyone is equal before the law and has the right to equal protection and benefit of the law." Equality includes the full and equal enjoyment of all rights and freedoms.

To promote the achievement of equality, legislative and other measures designed to protect or advance persons or categories of persons, disadvantaged by unfair discrimination, may be taken.

These children aren't protected by their parents or the schools. One of the ways to protect them, Beckman and Karvelas suggest, is that education authorities be far more assertive in handling these issues — and act against schools that manipulate enrolment along racial lines.

We need to overhaul the admissions policy and the school feeder zones concept, which often reproduces the legacy of apartheid group areas and provides some schools with a convenient excuse to prevent the admission of African pupils.

I would argue that the South African Schools Act needs to be amended to ensure the development of an anti-discrimination policy, which should be the responsibility of school governing bodies. Such bodies must adhere to it.

The admission of pupils in problematic schools should be done centrally or the determination of the "fullness" of such schools should not be left in the hands of principals.

The HSRC recommends: "The national Department of Education must disseminate guidelines to all governing bodies to facilitate the development of such a pol-

icy. This should be accomplished in tandem with anti-racist/anti-bias training for all school constituencies."

The guidelines and the policy should address all activities of the school. Ideally, these should encompass "staff development: new practices, proactively increasing the involvement of African parents in school governing bodies and the school's activities, by creating a more conducive environment and examining inhibiting factors; and shifting from a puritanical, dogmatic and self-righteous ethos and value system, which often acts as a smoke screen for authoritarian and patriarchal practices."

Also, in many schools, governing bodies are not representative of the population of pupils. Inhibiting factors that prevent the participation of African parents — such as a lack of transport, the holding of

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parents' meetings on days and at times which are unsuitable, the language used at these meetings, and the general atmosphere of the meetings — must be all considered.

The training of governing body members to understand and successfully implement their increasingly complex and intricate tasks should be prioritised.

It is the nation's children who are suffering. If this is not addressed, we should not be shocked when these schools turn out children who can speak good English, but despise their own people, their language and culture — and, in the process, continue to widen the racial divide.

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