

## ■ OPINION

# Consciousness of young people has been awakened

*In recognising harm inflicted on them, they see education has ill-prepared them for society*



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ON TUESDAY, June 2, learner after learner took to social media to share stories of absolute disgrace about their experiences at a significant number of high schools in Cape Town's southern suburbs.

What started as a global Instagram trend – “black lives matter so let's #blackouttuesday with a black square” – with schools posting supportive messages, quickly ascended into disturbing accounts of racism, discrimination, humiliation and exclusion by learners from the schools.

As my eyes scanned one post after another, the experiences of learners' humiliation, exclusion and dehumanisation compounded, made me doubt what I had done to my children by sending them to the schools being dragged across social media.

What did I hope to achieve by choosing historically white schools for my children, when they were not white? Why did I not stick to my own and follow what apartheid had tried to do so painfully to instil in me – that my difference is an unforgivable deficit.

My answer is simple: I believe in the capacity of human beings to be and do good, and I insist that teachers should be exemplars of this goodness.

Yes, I am profoundly aware of the reality in South Africa that, despite the ideological demise of apartheid, racism, and its embedded degradation of others, has not left South Africa any more than it has left the world's so-called greatest democracy, the US.

Racism, it seems, is a part of the human condition. As such, its harm is not limited to the oppressed.

When white people believe in their own supremacy, and candidly dismiss descriptors of white privilege, they reveal an ineptitude to understand just how powerfully and systemically race controls the narratives and lives of people.

The ineptness, some would say ignorance, is evident in a statement issued by one of the schools in response to the posts: “We will not allow the behaviour of a few malcontents to slander the reputation or disregard notions of a great school.”

Let's unpack this breathtaking remark (or is it a threat?).

First, forget about the proverbial “we”, so often employed by those who



A THEN 13-year-old Zulaikha Patel addresses fellow students at Pretoria Girls High School after learner-led protests over the school's hair policy, which black learners said was discriminatory and racist. | PHILL MAGAKOE

fear speaking as individuals.

Second, surely, just one “malcontent” like the kind on social media should be enough for self-reflection, rather than this blatant display of disregard?

Third, if there is indeed any slander at play, then how would the school describe its teachers, who stand accused (more than once) of despicable conduct, and how would it describe itself in its own perpetuation of the conduct by not acting against these teachers? Accountable.

And my last question to this and other schools, which might be bordering on issuing similar statements: What makes your school great?

Of course, it is true that these schools have given shape to many outstanding young people. But, it is equally true they have produced young people who have been harmed and traumatised by teachers and environments, whose ethical responsibility is to safeguard and nurture, as opposed to breaking down.

Whether schools want to admit it or not, these posts, filled with pain and anger, are as much a part of their legacy, as their purported greatness.

When we reflect on incidents of racism at some schools in the southern suburbs, we also need think about the socialisation of our young people. Young people are refined in the art of emulating what they see, rather than being told what to do.

If they are socialised into racism and disregard for others, then that's the kind of adults they are most likely to become.

And here, I turn my attention to parents who should never be standing on the sidelines of their children's education.

What are you teaching your

children in your homes? What example are you presenting? Do you speak out when you know about the kinds of atrocities being committed at your child's school, and not only when it involves your own child?

Your silence on these matters speaks volumes to your children.

Schools can and should be amazing places where young people from diverse backgrounds can come and be together. They should be places where everyone feels a sense of belonging.

It is clear from these posts, that something has awakened in the consciousness of young people against a backdrop of an America, which is on its knees politically and socially.

Education has many paradoxes – it can be used to liberate and it can be used to dominate and oppress, as was the case during apartheid. What does not change, as American novelist and activist James Baldwin reminds us, is that “as one begins to become conscious, one begins to examine the society in which he is being educated”.

Seemingly, our young people are becoming conscious about their education; they recognise the harm that has been inflicted upon them; that somewhere along the line they have been deprived of being seen as fully human.

More importantly, they know that their education has ill-prepared them for the society which they are required to navigate. It is hard to imagine how the schools listed in the litany of posts can carry on with business as usual.

Serious distortions and transgressions live in these schools and they cannot simply be redressed through superficial policy reform.

Of concern here are ethical matters of what it means to act with humanity and dignity.

The question, therefore, is not only whether our schools are conscious of the kinds of educational spaces they provide, but whether they have a conscience about what has been done in their “great” name.

The time has come for schools to attach actions to their dialogues and conversations.

The “great” names, which schools are so quick to cite in their justification of injustice, lest we forget, was established and propped up by the mechanisms of an unequal education system.

A system, which continues to thrive in covert admission criteria for particular kinds of learners, the appointment of teachers, and alienating climates, which demand assimilation and the loss of individual identities as a form acceptance.

The time has come for a re-articulation of “greatness” – one which resonates with the principles of democratic justice, rather than apartheid and colonial vitriol. A good starting point would be for schools to cleanse themselves of those individuals whose racism can damage all they encounter. Nothing good can come from people like these, and teaching is certainly not a profession for such cowardice.

Finally, the fact that past and present learners have taken to a public space to voice their frustration, anger and pain is a confirmation that they did not experience their school as a safe space.

Denying this reality will do very little for any future “greatness” these schools might envisage for themselves.

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