

Prof Amanda Gouws*

Tomorrow we celebrate Youth Day. This is a day when we are reminded that not all children in South Africa are treated equally. It was believed that black children could be exposed to inferior education because they were different – because they were not white. This was the beginning of the end of apartheid but also the application of a long-term blow to Afrikaans through which it would become known as the language of the oppressor.

If we consider people as the other because they are black, gay or disabled, it means that there is a norm by which they are measured – whiteness or heterosexuality or a lack of disability. This process of othering determines which people are marginalised and singled out for rejection. Think of what happened to the Jews under Hitler's Nazi regime.

On the eve of Youth Day, D.F. Malan High School is in the news for all the wrong reasons. Clearly, there are processes at work that single out students who are different for marginalisation and humiliation through homophobic behaviours that are apparently blatantly allowed. An important teaching moment was lost here in educating children that what is different is not necessarily unacceptable. I can appeal to the Constitution – that there is a Bill of Rights that prohibits discrimination based on, among other things, gender and sexual orientation. But rights on a piece of paper mean little if they are not enforced.

Those who have to enforce them are those people in positions of authority over children. In the first place, it is the parents. Parents are the first socialising agents that children deal with. Children base their behaviour on that of parents. The foul language that a student uttered on WhatsApp towards gay children (as reported in Sunday's *Rapport*) speaks of what is permissible in the spaces in which this child moves. One wonders what this child's parents say about gay people, and which homophobic statements are considered acceptable.

Secondly, it is teachers. They should be role-models. They should teach children to be tolerant of accepting difference by having empathy. It is not acceptable for teachers to single out gay children and then blame them for their sexual orientation. Gay children are very vulnerable and need acceptance and support.

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