

Teachers are in an ideal position to help

Social differences can be surmounted and respect for values taught from the classroom

OUR world is becoming increasingly complex and intolerant of social difference.

Some world leaders actively ferment social divisions, giving rise to unprecedented racisms, sexism and classism. Schools and especially teachers have a significant role to play in creating opportunities for children and adolescents to engage in dialogue and to affirm the value of difference in themselves and others.

Constructive discussions about differences in schools are not new. In the aftermath of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jane Elliot, a third grade teacher in the US, was appalled at the racist talk she heard among her third graders. She developed a much discussed intervention to conscientise her pupils about the harmful and hurtful effects of racism.

When they were adults she organised a reunion where they told her how her lessons in third grade stayed with them for the rest of their lives. It fundamentally reshaped how they understood and related to people who were different from them.

The nature of racism has changed since the '70s, both abroad and in South Africa. It is less obvious in everyday situations but no less painful when it is experienced. While "white" and "non-white" signs have been removed, racism is alive and well. It is also more readily intermingled with other forms of oppressions such as sexism and classism. Writers such as the American civil rights advocate Kimberlé Crenshaw refers to intersecting oppressions and social privileges as intersectionality.

A few years ago, I was deeply moved when I listened to the stories of "born-free" teenage girls in a neighbourhood not far from our university. They were the coloured daughters of farm workers and loved the idea that we came to their community with postgraduate students. As psychologists, we ran support groups where girls could discuss the burdens

Analysis

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and benefits of growing up as poor coloured girls in a democratic South Africa.

They told us of their aspirations, how they saw the future and what education meant to them. It was striking to hear how their everyday experiences in their village were drenched with racism, sexism and class discrimination. It was also striking to hear how they contributed to maintaining the racism and sexism about themselves as a group.

This contribution to their oppression is no doubt what the Martiniquen and Afro-Caribbean psychiatrist and philosopher Frantz Fanon referred to when he talked about internalisation of the "oppressor". Among these young girls, I could hear what impact ongoing oppression had on their thinking.

They talked about how they as poor girls are looked at with disapproval by white people in the upmarket shopping centre on the periphery of their town. As one girl said: "They probably think we are going to shoplift."

The girls talked about some coloured middle class boys, now attending integrated schools in the town, who told them that they were useless because they did not wear branded goods.

They told us about the older men who harassed them and commented on their maturing bodies as they walked down the streets. They worried that they would not be marriageable enough because successful black and coloured men were marrying white women. This could mean their aspiration to a middle class life through marriage was now blocked.

They told us how unfairly they were treated on the hockey field where school teams in their town were still overwhelmingly white.

I remember clearly how Kaylin* pointed her

finger in the air with contempt while shouting out her contribution in the group. Candice* followed suit but spoke more quietly as her words faded away. These girls spoke eloquently but with deep pain about the micro-aggressions woven into the fabric of their daily lives.

They were not only recipients of oppression but actively internalised or embraced stereotypes about coloured people like themselves.

One girl said: "One thing I can say about blacks, they have guts. We coloureds just want to sit. They sacrifice everything. We give up and turn off the road. We get pregnant while still at school and don't study further."

Kaylin, Candice and their friends were animated in their talk. Coloured people they said, were "like crayfish in a box", always pulling those who rise up, back into the box. I watched the cadence of emotions, from deep pain and anger, to raucous laughter. They had learnt so well that humour was an effective strategy to protect themselves from the pain of unrelenting humiliation. These young girls, and many others, are growing up while listening to national stories about themselves. They resist and internalise some of these stories but have little opportunity to have conversations with supportive adults.

Teachers can be these adults and schools can be places where they actively engage adolescents to build positive ways of seeing themselves, their communities and their contributions to a complex South Africa. To facilitate such dialogue, teachers need to understand their own relationships with difference within the varied contexts of the schools where they teach. (*Pseudonyms)

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