

Class war looms as pupils suffer racism in schools

The ghosts of apartheid keep country divided

THIS week, the annual Children's Gauge was released. Presented by the Children's Institute based at the University of Cape Town, it provides South Africa with the truest picture of our most vulnerable and youngest citizens.

One of its key areas for research is education – a central socioeconomic right.

The institute wrote this week that South Africa has high levels of school enrolment and attendance.

"Among children of school-going age, the vast majority (97 percent) attended some form of educational facility. Since 2002, the national attendance rate has seen a 3 percentage point increase," wrote researchers Katharine Hall and Arianne de Lannoy.

"Overall attendance rates tend to mask the problem of drop-out among older children, however. But attendance rates alone do not capture the regularity of children's school attendance or their progress through school.

"Research has shown that children from more disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to enrol and are more prone to dropping out or progressing more slowly.

"Racial inequalities in school advancement remain strong."

THIS piece, written by children under the Monitoring Africa's Children's News Agency, captures some views around this subject.

The widely reported incident of racial segregation at Curro Roodeplaat Private School where the children were allegedly separated into buses according to their race is the exception to the many untold encounters of racism every day in South African schools.

Pupils from some of the most highly ranked high schools in Joburg's northern suburbs, where most pupils are racially mixed, were asked how different races at their schools relate and how they are treated.

They expressed their opinions on racial integration in their schools as well as the role of teachers in perpetuating racism.

Some of them feel that not only



TAINTED EDUCATION: From left, Balungile Memani, Esther Sibanda, Mbali Mathanjana, Habiba Abbasi, and Christy Chitungu.

are they being discriminated against by their peers but by the school system as well.

Most of the black pupils feel that they are trapped in policies by their schools' codes of conduct regarding their hairstyles.

For instance, a pupil in Grade 9 recalls how he was tackled over his hairstyle and how different races are treated differently: "They are a lot stricter on black people than white people on hairstyles. I remember the one time I had a hairstyle like that (he points to a coloured pupil) but a bit bigger, and then the one coloured (pupil) had exactly the same thing and they pulled me out (of assembly) and said 'You can't have that hairstyle'. I said 'But he's got the same' and they were like 'but that's different'."

Black pupils also complain they are not allowed to go bald, have long hair, and "combovers" (a trendy hairstyle largely associated with Justin Bieber) like their white counterparts.

Students also feel that teachers don't understand their cultural

heritage, which makes it difficult for them to express themselves freely at school.

A black pupil describes a recent incident when he stood up as a teacher addressed him. The teacher questioned why he stood up and he explained that in his culture it was a way of showing respect, to which the teacher responded: "I find that stupid."

Many students spoke about the racism exhibited by their teachers. "Teachers pay more attention to white people, white people are taken more seriously," said one pupil, who also gave an example of a white teacher only screaming at the black students while the entire class was making a noise.

Others felt that they were not catered for at their schools. One student elaborates: "Sometimes assemblies are done in Afrikaans or English. This causes a controversy because there are no Zulu or Xhosa assemblies. We feel left out!"

"We limit ourselves in some things. Let's say we talk in an African language so white people will be like uncomfortable," said

another pupil.

While some pupils felt that different races were well integrated and others agreed at first, with more thought on the matter they contradicted themselves.

A pupil, for instance, felt that different races mixed well but later pointed out how they "tease each other racially".

Others felt strongly that racism exists in their schools. A black pupil, for example, recalls how a fellow white pupil called to him: "Hey blackie, come here." When asked about his response, he says: "It hurts, but it's life."

Another pupil – from a private school in northern Joburg – says she feels belittled by white pupils at her school.

When asked to elaborate, she says: "In our school, black people believe that white people undermine them (through) some of the words they are called, such as 'ghetto' and 'ratchet' (a slang word meaning trashy).

"How are we (black people) expected to hang out with white people that look down on us

because we don't live in suburbs or we aren't millionaires?"

These experiences show that issues of race need attention in the schools and that race is still a burning issue in the lives of everyday South Africans, including in the schooling system.

Children who have not experienced apartheid are suffering from the after-effects of apartheid.

In order to solve this problem, the education department should start looking within the schooling systems and focusing on racial integration.

Teachers and the education system itself need to be more accepting and understanding of people's race and cultural backgrounds.

In addition, schools should evaluate their codes of conduct in order to adhere to the country's constitution and respect everyone's race and culture.

● *This article was written by pupils participating in Media Monitoring Africa's Children's News Agency. They interviewed other pupils from schools they're not enrolled in.*