Class war looms as pupils suffer racism in schools

The ghosts of apartheid keep country divided

This week, the national Children's Voice was launched. Presented by the Children's Institute based at the University of Cape Town, it provides South Africa with the true picture of our most vulnerable and young citizens.

One of its key areas for research is education—a central focus of our liberation.

The institute was thus elated when it learned of the proposals of school enrolment guidelines at a nationwide conference in Meyerton.

"Among children who are attending school, the vast majority of our pupils are in grades one to three. Since 2002, the national attendance rate has seen a 9.8 percentage point increase," wrote researchers Katherine Moth and Arinze De Leon.

"Overall admission rates tend to mask the problem of dropout at the later grades, however, which is severe in rural areas. In addition, the "informal" system means that many children's attendance of school is irregular or non-existent."

Research has shown that children from more disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to enrol and less likely to progress out of primary school. "Failure, inequalities in educational attainment remain stark.

This paper, written by children under the Monitoring for Africa's Children's Network, captures some views around this subject.

The widely reported incidence of racial segregation at a new Spoon Position Private School where the children were overwhelmingly black, in terms of their race, was highlighted in a recent report. This is a concern that is deeply embedded in the system, especially in South African schools.

Pupils from some of the most highly ranked schools in Johannesburg who live a world away from their counterparts who are more privileged are being scrutinised for their abilities to compete at the top. The same pupils are also facing the shadow of racist attacks.

They expressed their opinions on the impact of segregation at their schools as well as their views on teaching methods. Some of them feel that they are being discriminated against by their peers and the school system as a whole.

Most of the black pupils feel that racism is an everyday reality at their schools' codes of conduct regarding their behaviour.

For instance, a pupil in Grade 9 recalls how he was ridiculed over his hairline and how different races are treated differently. "They are a lot stricter on black pupils than white pupils on hairlines. I remember the one time I had a hairline that was too short and then they asked me to get it cut, but they let white pupils with the same hairline just have it," he said. "It's not fair!"

Students also feel that teachers don't understand their culture and heritage, which makes it difficult for them to express themselves freely at school. Teachers are often reluctant to speak the language of some pupils, which is the main language of their parents.

A black pupil describes how a teacher addressed him. The teacher congratulated him and explained that he had a natural gift and he was looking forward to him becoming a good lawyer. However, the pupil could not help thinking about the difference in treatment.

"I would like to see more white pupils being subjected to the same treatment," he said. "I feel that the system is biased against black pupils."

Others feel strongly that racial violence in their schools. A black pupil, for example, recalls how he was followed by white pupils and called names like "black dog". When asked about his response, he says, "I fought back, but it's still going on."

A pupil in a private school in northern KwaZulu-Natal says she feels bullied by white pupils at her school.

When asked to elaborate, she says, "In our school, black pupils are not allowed to go near the white boys or play with them. They are always being taken to the office by discipline. I feel that the system is biased against black pupils."

Most of them feel that their teachers' views on the issue are not balanced and that they are not seen as being students of different racial backgrounds. Parents are often more concerned about the difficulties their children face and the hurdles they have to overcome. As such, there is a lot of support for the same.