

## **Give all youngsters an equal chance at success.**

Mthembu, Ntokozo (2006)

We know that access to basic education is a fundamental human right for every child. We know that South Africa has a clear obligation to provide free basic education to all children. But why is it that expulsion from schools is still the norm for many children from disadvantaged backgrounds?

Recently I witnessed a mass expulsion of about 25 pupils for non-payment of their school fees while I was waiting to see the principal of one of the high schools in a township - one of those created for apartheid purposes as a labour reserve next to the city of Durban.

This township, with its clusters of shacks and informal settlements, provides a stark contrast to the shopping centre situated nearby. Witnessing the expulsion of the pupils was a sobering moment. The only fault of the pupils was that they happened to be poor. This approach is detrimental to the building of young minds as well as the future nation.

If we are a "new society" that preaches that the "doors of learning shall be open to all", it is an outrage that this sentiment was not present in a township school where there is the greatest need for it.

It is not fair to penalise pupils because of their economic status. This type of learning experience is obviously traumatising and devaluing to those pupils who are summarily expelled for non-payment of school fees. It also raises other critical questions - for example, around the role of teachers.

### **Dignity**

Teachers have an important role to play in ensuring that schoolchildren are treated with dignity and fairness in the classroom. This begs the question: What is the future of the expelled pupils, especially considering that the mid-year examinations are imminent?

### **Something has to be done.**

I therefore opted to give the head of the school a call about this situation. After talking to the principal over the phone about the status of the expelled pupils, he said those pupils had been expelled because their parents had failed to fulfil their promise to pay on the agreed date.

He further explained that the parents had a platform where they could highlight their concern or problems about school fees, which they did not use.

I inquired why this platform was not being used by the principal to discuss such problems before the pupils were expelled. The expulsion causes humiliation, and all means should be exhausted in order to make sure that pupils do not suffer such trauma. The principal did not really have an answer. However, he said that the pupils would be permitted to write examinations.

### **How does this happen to young people who are poor?**

It is important to understand legislation pertaining to the issue of non-payment of school fees. The legislation needs to be clearer to avoid the provision of loopholes for unscrupulous educators to act unfairly against pupils who cannot afford to pay school fees.

Legislation concerning the payment of school fees states: "The state must fund public schools from public revenue on an equitable basis in order to ensure the proper exercise of the rights of learners to education and the redress of past inequalities in educational provision". There is a direct responsibility on the governing bodies to fund-raise to avoid the expulsion of pupils.

### **Illiterate**

Statistics in South Africa's 2004 report show that in KwaZulu-Natal in 1999 about 49% of pupils were illiterate, compared to 41% in South Africa as a whole. In addition, KZN had the highest number of illiterate adults - 1 982 845 - followed by the Eastern Cape with 1 517 890. Mpumalanga had the highest pupil-educator ratio, followed by KwaZulu-Natal.

Furthermore, statistics in 2001 showed a proportional increase of African youth above 18 who were not attending any educational institution. This is a sad state of affairs for black youth in KZN and, indeed, the country.

It could be argued that such expulsions are responsible for forcing many black youngsters to opt for low-paying jobs in the retail sector which do not require high levels of education or skill.

This means that the only jobs these black youths have access to are low-paid, temporary, and non-unionised, with low or no benefits. This ensures a vicious cycle of non-development, marginalisation and further impoverishment.

In conclusion, the practice of expulsion of pupils for non-payment of school fees is one that perpetuates inequitable development, in much the same way as apartheid. How can we say we have a single education system while pupils continue to be treated differently and according to the attitudes and wishes of the authorities at that particular time? The education system does not serve the rights of disadvantaged and marginalised pupils to education.