

Private schools: vice or virtue?

A seminar on equal education for all was held recently in the Natal region. It was attended by some 150 teachers and educationalists from the Natal Teachers Association of South Africa, the Society of Natal Teachers and the National Education Union of South Africa.

It set out to cover issues of equality in provision, to explore curriculum and people's education and to discuss the role of private schools in society. It was this debate which generated substantial discussion, especially in a session dealing with questions concerning the role of private schools.

Freelance journalist SITHEMBISO SANGWENI attended the conference and wrote this report on that particular debate.

The role of private schools was the subject of intense discussion at the "Equal Education for All" conference held in Durban in September. The conference was jointly hosted by the Natal Teachers Society and Idasa.

The question that dominated the discussion amongst the academics was whether private schools could provide real equal education for all.

Cynthia Mphathi, a lecturer at the Umlazi college for Further Education who spoke on education and culture, told the delegates that "since we are living in the technological era our culture needs to be functional as opposed to being aesthetic".

"The sentiment being shared here, calls for a re-look and re-appraisal of what we would like to pass on to our children," said Mphathi.

She said that culture, which was a complex issue, included knowledge, belief, art, morale, and custom collated as details of people, their geography, history and relations which exist between them.

Culture, she added, was a progression of human society from one stage of organisation to the next, where each stage is characterised by an increase in man's conscious control of nature. This includes the art of subsistence, or primary institutions like government, family and property.

However, Mrs N Nkosi, another lecturer at Umlazi College of Education, spoke on the role of private schools and pointed out that private schools have generally been perceived as perpetuating social inequalities. This was borne out by the fact that children who attended private schools were from middle class families. "Private schools propel an elitist culture which creates social distance between children," Nkosi said. As a result, children from private schools find themselves isolated from real life, she said.

But parents still send their children to these schools because they felt that the private schools provided a chance for their children to receive a decent education, Mrs Nkosi said. Because they admit a limited number of students and because of their privileged positions these schools, for example, attracted some of the best teachers. However, white private schools have played a divisive role in the society because of their selectivity, Nkosi said.

Prof A M Barret of the University of Natal said that private schools had a role to play but warned that this role was not primarily to provide equal education for all.

"If private schools do have a role this would presumably mean that we should strive to provide equal opportunities for members in the defined groups to enable them to choose such schools instead of state-controlled ones," he said.

In South Africa it is a matter of urgency that issues of equality be addressed. "Inequalities between groups, whether economically or racially defined, are painful evidence of an unjust society," Barret said.

He added that in black schools in particular there is a debilitating, destructive loss of morale, a loss of faith in schooling in general.

He attributed this to the unequal distribution of resources and added that it was also the result of state-backed monolithic interpretations of culture, which among other things denied a proper place for the principle of freedom and hence the empowering role of education. However, he conceded that private schools have a role to play but pointed



Delegates at the equal education seminar listen attentively.

out that he could not justify their role simply on grounds of equality, but partly because he believed that the principles of equality itself is threatened unless their cardinal principles are taken into account.

The African social concept of "ubuntu" required "caring for individuals and groups, freedom to develop understandings, skills and personal relations, as well as equality of treatment, whether the treatment is of access, provision or outcome," said Barret.

The seminar was closed by John Aitchison, University of Natal education specialist, who summarised some of the discussion including the one on private schools. Commenting after the event he pointed out the need for more informal contact between teachers over day to day issues of classroom experience and facilities in addition to the more abstract debate over policy and provision.

Teachers find common ground

After arranging several successful weekend forums for scholars, Idasa's Port Elizabeth office decided to do the same for teachers. Teachers from all Port Elizabeth communities were invited to spend a weekend in October at the Tsitsikamma Lodge outside Port Elizabeth.

Generally the response to the invitation was poor, except for the white English-speaking community and the black community, who both supported the venture enthusiastically. Sadly, those who missed this opportunity by standing sceptically on the sidelines, have fallen a further few steps behind in the process which emerged from this very successful initiative. The teachers, when they left this weekend, might have been forgiven for believing that they have the edge on their counterparts who are still battling to overcome their prejudices and scepticisms.

The 22 teachers who did participate clearly found it a most constructive exercise. One never ceases to be amazed at how quickly the realisation dawns that there is so much common ground and goodwill, just waiting to be discovered. Colleagues who have been separated in their careers by race barriers suddenly come together and find that they not only share many of the same concerns, but experience many of the same problems. Distrust and fear are replaced by

relief and hope as new friendships are formed, and new associations made.

Brother Neil McGurk, head of the non-racial Sacred Heart College in Johannesburg, was the guest facilitator at the weekend. He brought with him a wealth of information and experience, built up through years of resolving, in his school, the very problems that are set to face others who are just now entering the realm of non-racialism.

Most enlightening was his overview of the demographic patterns in education in South Africa, and his warning that white schools are slowly being faced with the truth that they will either have to close down or be prepared to admit all races. And that the jobs of many teachers will only be secured by the willingness of their schools to become non-racial.



Teachers get together.