

An Open Letter to White Teachers and Parents - Consider this an Olive Branch

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This week, we celebrated International Children's Day on June 1st. This week also marked almost two weeks of global protests following the murder of George Floyd in the USA. It has been a strange week indeed. I have been on several phone calls with parents, staff members and school leaders about the current chasms being exposed at their schools, by the learners themselves. I have also had several children message me via Instagram, Twitter and email, begging me to protect their anonymity, but voicing their anger at the experiences of racism they are encountering from friends and teachers at their schools. In some cases, the issues are about the current silence of their schools at the pain many of them are experiencing in light of police brutality against black people here at home and abroad. In another case it is that learners are voicing their frustrations online about the behaviour of their teachers and their white friends. In all cases I've encountered this week, the school leadership is really struggling with figuring out what to do. Which is why they've come to me to offer my expertise.



On the evening of Thursday, 4 June 2020, I came across a page on Instagram called @yousilenceweamplify. A colleague had posted about it on Facebook and encouraged parents to go to this page and bear witness to the stories of their children, ALL OF OUR CHILDREN. Whilst details of who started this page are unclear to me, I think it is EXTREMELY important that every single parent, school teacher, school leader and just generally any human who cares about our children and our country, should spend some time on that page only to read and to listen.

I started reading through the stories, comments and accounts of experiences being shared by several children, young adults and alumni of some of the most prestigious private and public schools in our country.

Each and every story - at the time of writing this article there were 257- was about an experience or multiple experiences of racism that Black, Coloured and Indian children had experienced during their time in these schools. There are also stories from Black children from other parts of Africa who have also been victims of xenophobia from staff and fellow learners. I also read a few stories of how white children disrespect staff members of colour with no consequences. For some, these experiences took place over 10 or 15 years ago and this is the first time they are speaking about it, for others the experiences are as recent as 2016, 2017, 2019 and even now in 2020.

As I read through this Instagram page, I was not shocked. Yes, you read that correctly.

I was not shocked by 257 stories of racism by children and adults who have attended the so-called 'top schools' in our country.

I was not shocked by 257 stories of mostly white adults displaying both blatant and subtle disdain for children of colour purely on the basis of their skin, culture or religion.

Why was I not shocked you may ask? I was not shocked because these stories reflect and mirror some of the experiences that myself and other friends who went to ex-Model C schools also had when we were in school. These stories reflect the years of damage we have all been trying to undo since leaving school and university, the damage done by going to learn in previously designated 'whites-only' spaces, even in an era of 'rainbow nation' integration.

Since Thursday, the responses from some of the named schools on these issues has been wildly inconsistent ranging from open acknowledgements of the pain caused and commitments to do better, to more draconian responses where schools have sent veiled threats via social media letters and lawyers letters, advising parents and children on the social media policies of the school or threatening to take legal action against children who bring the school's reputation into disrepute if they post things online that are not 'aligned to school values and principles' – this is a direct quote from one of the school's I have seen.

I think this is incredibly unfortunate that any school would respond to the ***justified*** pain, hurt and frustration of CHILDREN who are finally speaking up online because the corridors of their schools are not safe or brave spaces in which they can make their grievances heard.

None of the stories shared by these children are new to black adults in this country. NONE OF THEM. All those stories reflect the very different experiences we had whilst in school, with our rainbow-nation circle of white friends and perfect Model-C accents. All of us have stories of discrimination in one way, shape or form. The difference is that for some of us we've only just developed the vocabulary to articulate our sadness and frustrations with more effective and direct language in recent years. For many of us, our parents sent us to these schools so that we will never face the same discrimination that they faced at the violent intersection of blackness and poverty in this country. The incredible sacrifices our parents made to keep us in the 'white' schools was often to ensure that *in lieu* of changing our skin colour, we could at least change our class and social status by accessing the markers of whiteness in our society: a 'good' English accent, a general grasp of classical music and theatre, a decent proximity to the children of white successful people in our communities and perhaps the well-rounded Anglo-Saxon Christian education to ensure we clearly understood the boundaries of our humanity in relation to the divinity and theology of white spaces.

Our parents were not wrong to send us to these schools. But I do know that many of them perhaps only found out much later that they were not paying the same fees for their children's education. Whilst our white counterparts were paying the standard fees noted in the school's annual schedule of fees, we - Black, Coloured and Indian children - were paying extra fees. The price we paid for a well-rounded education was daily, small and big acts of racism from our friends and teachers who made it a point to communicate to us in various ways that we did not belong.

Whether it was the favouritism, or the dismissal of our experiences or the disproportionate punishment that we would get for the SAME violation of school rules that a white child committed, we constantly knew that the price for this education was the impairment of our dignity. And if we dared to speak out against it, either our parents would chastise us and remind us to be grateful that we are in these schools, or our schools would chastise us and remind us that we are there on their borrowed goodwill.

So no, I am not surprised by the 257 stories of racism that CHILDREN are experiencing at the hands of people entrusted to care for them by the state and by their parents.

It is for this reason that I started my work as a social justice consultant. As South Africans, we really have underestimated who is bearing the brunt of the forced-integration-rainbowist project. The far-reaching mental and physical health consequences for people who daily experience racism whether in the form of micro-

aggressions or explicit racial discrimination are very real.

I do not want and do not believe that children should be fighting these kinds of battles. Black, Coloured and Indian children in primary school should be concerned with colouring-in books and playing in the sun and learning how to read. They should not be concerned with begging to be white by being forced to straighten the 'kroeserige' curls out of their hair, or being humiliated for their accents or their parents' accents. Our children should not have any more cares in the world than your children just because they didn't win the racial lottery.

Black, Coloured and Indian children in high school should be concerned with thinking confidently about their future career prospects and dreaming as widely and as deeply as they can about the futures that their privileged education should afford them. When you read the @yousilenceweamplify page, there are COUNTLESS stories of white teachers actively and explicitly discouraging black children from applying for certain programmes or courses at universities, telling them that they will amount to nothing; and giving the exact opposite message to white children who in some cases had less marks than them for the same subjects. Thankfully many of these children proved their educators wrong, but surely that shouldn't be the case.

So, whilst I am infuriated, disappointed and deeply saddened by this current moment, I am also very hopeful about the possibilities this moment can bring.

White South Africans, we have been here before. We have been at this point several times in our very short post-apartheid history. To quote Allan Magubane, Deputy Head of Transformation at St John's College, 'there are moments in our history where the baby was coming. It was time to deliver the baby and we refused. We missed the chances to birth justice because we chose to avoid the pain of delivery. Please understand, the work of this moment cannot be reduced to your discomfort, we cannot reduce the birthing of justice to your individual pain.'

257 stories of current children in schools, and current adults who were once children, screaming: WE WERE IN PAIN, WE ARE IN PAIN, WE ARE STILL IN PAIN!

"Ma'am, this hurts."

"Sir, this hurts."

"Please do not turn a blind eye?"

I recognise that so many schools mentioned and those who will still be mentioned on this page are confused, not knowing what to do or how to respond and I know some of you are even afraid. I know that some of my white teachers from school and other schools will read this story and other stories and say, “What? I thought these kids loved me,” or “I thought I did my best for these kids,”. Some of you may be overwhelmed by guilt, recognising that yes, you actually did mess up back then, and maybe you have started your own personal journey to do better but you’ve never had the chance to apologise or own up to what you did. Yet, others of you may think that this is an ungrateful bunch of children who then didn’t deserve to be at your prestigious school with its hundreds of years of tradition.

All these knee-jerk feelings and reactions are completely fine, if they remain as knee-jerk reactions. But at some point, white teachers need to move beyond that. This moment is not about you. This moment is about our children who are all being damaged by your intentional and unintentional mistakes, jokes or ignorance.

I, and many other Black, Coloured and Indian people who went to these schools, have witnessed how our teachers and white friends will get deeply passionate about the SPCA and animal rights, buy multiple stickers in support of the plight of black rhinos and force us all into conversations about veganism and deforestation. I have seen these same people unfazed and completely unmoved by the humiliation, abuse and deaths of black people. I have seen it and this generation of high school children has seen it too.



I want schools in this time to think very carefully and reimagine their responses to the current moment:

1. Pause. Listen. Breathe. Repeat.

You need to pause, listen and breathe. Literally, you need to just stop, be quiet and breathe. White people seldom have to exercise the muscle of discomfort for the collective good. This is a good time to get practice.

2. Consult a Social Justice Practitioner committed to Anti-Racism, NOT non-racialism (that thing is dead and tired now).

You need to think intentionally about taking action. Please don't try do this without students and parents of colour in the room. In different contexts this will look different. Some of you need to write open-ended apology letters and not even try to defend yourselves because we have generations of children and adults who have receipts of what you have done to them. Some of you need to take your entire school leadership onto a call with me and other racial justice practitioners in this country to talk through what a helpful, healing and restorative response can look like. This is not the time for non-racialism and non-racism and cute 'kumbaya' quotes. This is the time to develop anti-racism and social justice intervention strategies that will both empower and encourage all members of your school community to get on board.

One workshop will not fix this. Trust me, I know. Start thinking through how much time you may be willing to offer, think through a budget and get people like me and others on board.

3. Do not threaten children and their parents unnecessarily.

What you are **NOT** going to do in this time, is threaten children and their parents with legal action for speaking up about their experiences of racism at your hands. You are not going to send veiled threats via social media telling our children to respect your school's social media policy because you are worried about potential reputational damage.

The reputation of your school is not more important than the health and well-being of our children. It is not. And I can guarantee you that such veiled threats against children will receive the worst backlash from our society, so whatever reputation you thought you were trying to protect will be lost either way.

4. Adopt a posture of humility - be ready to acknowledge what you don't know.

But NONE of you, and I mean it, NONE of you get to use this moment to showcase and show off how diverse you are and how much you suddenly value inclusivity. This is not the time for performative allyship, this is not the time for posting meaningless hashtags and black squares if the black children in your school are saying they cannot breathe. Even if you have started your efforts on this journey, this is a time for deep and humble reflection about the aspects of your efforts that are not working.



What children at our schools have done this week, is to show that the emperor has been caught without his clothes on. And while that is painful and deeply embarrassing, that is still a good thing. Because now we have a chance to sew a beautiful, more colourful, better fitting tapestry of childhood memories for all children at our schools.

This is the time to be brave. This is the time to recognise that you, as a white schoolteacher or school leader, you literally do not have all the answers because you do not know what being on the other side of structural and systemic racism looks like. You have no idea. This is the time to seek answers, knowing that you don't know what you don't know and that is okay.

Trust me when I say that white children in South Africa will be better off for having white teachers who are willing to do the work with them. White children in South Africa need and deserve an education that helps them become more empathetic, more aware of their privilege and deeply committed to dismantling all forms of injustice that they see in the world, so that they can see every other human as equal to them.

There are people like me and many others who are willing to journey with you on this work, so that in another 10 or 20 years from now, we never hear these stories, and if we do, they should actually shock us.

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