

A day in SA's miracle school

Jonathan Jansen | 08 September, 2011 00:37



It is 4pm on September 6 2011. Every child is in school, not a soul has left.

Every teacher is on site, not a car has moved. I follow the pairs of neat, black shoes gathered in two rows down the length of the inner courtyard of the school - there is no school hall, and there is no loud hailer. My voice would have to carry through the open air.

Every shoe is brightly polished. Every window is whole. Every blade of grass seems perfectly cut. Every child's head is smoothly shaven. Every pupil is clothed in spotless grey uniform.

The short principal lifts his arm high and with the thumbs-up signal, more than 1 000 high school students fall quiet, instantly. I am, once again, inside South Africa's best high school. It is where I come again and again when I despair about the future of our country. This is my holy place of annual pilgrimage: Zwelibanzi High School, Umlazi, J-section, in Durban, principal Sibusiso Maseko.

It has been a tiring day that will end at the grounds of Hilton College with talks to boys and teachers on what are easily the most beautiful school grounds anywhere in South Africa.

But the day started early in a place called Wentworth, where four schools gathered their pupils for me to address what the invitation described as a cancer eroding the spirit of youth and community- drugs and gangs.

It does not take long to get the children hyped-up about their futures in a dismal, colourless community where fathers are seldom present and girls fall pregnant too early. The only recognition boys can achieve is in the comfort - and safety - of a local gang. But here in Wentworth a combination of courageous teachers and resilient community leaders are fighting back against formidable odds.

Then on to a school with impressive resources and one of the most inspiring principals I've ever met. It is St Mary's DSG in Kloof, and I am astounded by the values-based education

that the young girls learn and how attuned they are, black and white, to the responsibility that comes with privilege.

But it is at Zwelibanzi with its rudimentary classrooms and its elementary facilities that South Africa's future will be decided. The computer laboratory has very few machines; but two boys are working during the lunch break on finding treatments for ischemic stroke patients from electronic resources.

"What makes your school different from other schools in the area?" I ask one girl who is mopping the floors of her classroom.

Her answer comes straight from the psychology textbooks on motivation: "Our teachers expect much from us."

Both pianos are hopelessly out of tune. But the children learn "voice" and the music teacher has collected basic resources to teach the children to sing.

"So what do you want to become one day?" I ask another group.

They fight for the visitor's attention as planned careers range from pilots to lawyers to chartered accountants.

"Why not teaching?" I ask instinctively.

"Too much stress," they answer almost in unison.

It is a chilling reminder that what enables a school like this to defy the odds means having a principal and teachers who absorb enormous stress to give these children a chance at success. Then comes the more astounding announcement. The school only closes at 4pm for the lower grades. Grade 12 pupils continue at the grey-uniformed school till 8 that night. I have to sit to catch my breath.

There must be all kinds of psychological and physiological reasons why keeping children this late might not be the best idea.

"What about travel home that late at night?" we ask the principal.

"The parents arrange taxis," he answers.

The community stands rock-solid behind the school's ambitions.

The bell rings, but there is no rush to the gate for the pre-Grade 12 pupils. They love being here. The Grade 12s head back to class, and then a scene I will never forget. Coming into the school gates at this late hour of the day are children with red uniforms, others with blue uniforms, and more. These are Grade 12s from other high schools who want to join the teach-and-learn until 8pm group. It is infectious, this powerful learning culture at Zwelibanzi.

I no longer worry about the thugs circling Luthuli House. Their replacement leaders will come from this sacred place inside Umlazi.