

Inferior and unequal education stops here

New generation determined to bring about change, write
Graeme Bloch and Yoliswa Dwane

ANYONE who marched this Human Rights Day alongside 25 000 to 30 000 pupils would have been inspired by their energy and disciplined determination. On a day of intense heat, not a bottle or stone was thrown. Uniformed pupils from suburbs in Cape Town, and some parents and teachers, assembled on the Grand Parade to put forward a simple demand: "We want the children to read! Build more school libraries, stock them with books and appoint a teacher to run each library."

Minister of Basic Education Angie Motshekga was nowhere to be seen.

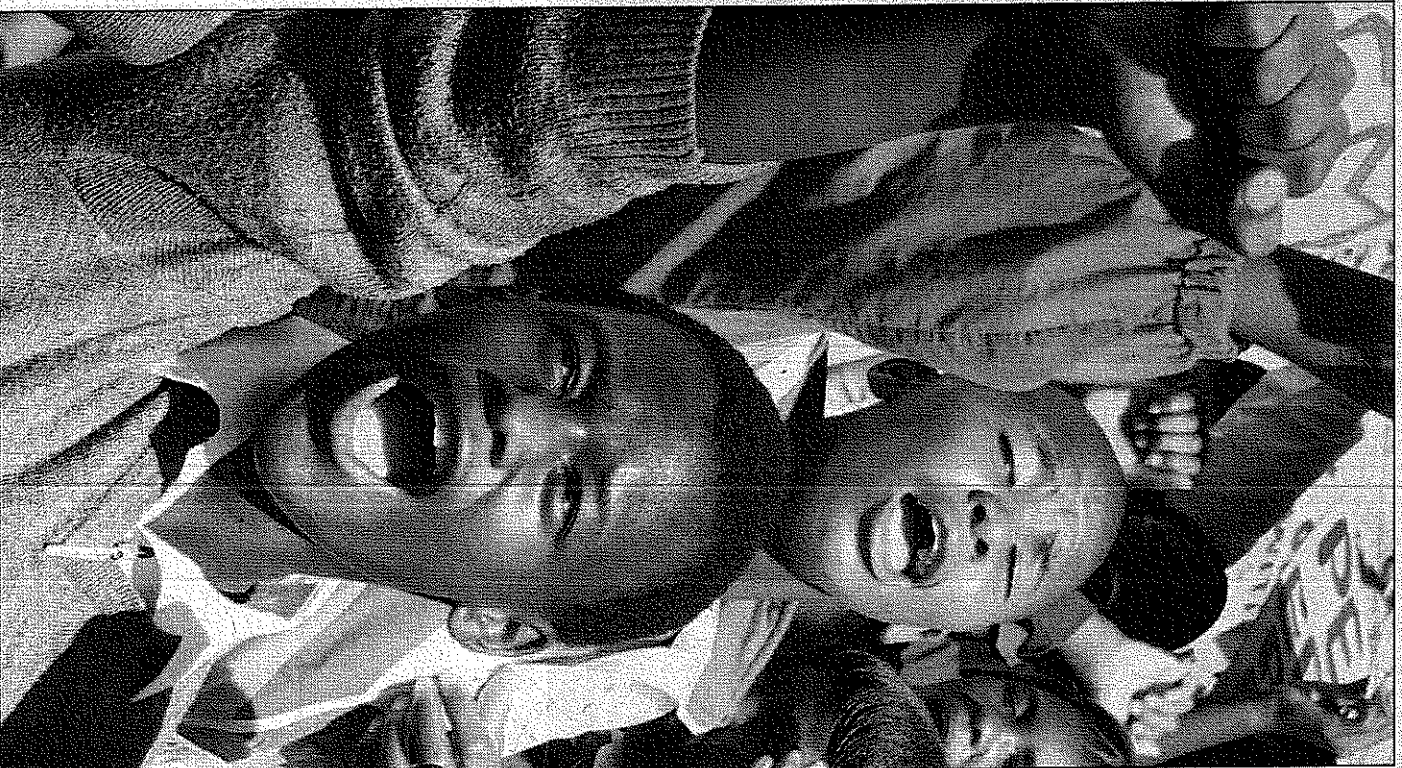
The demand to adopt proper norms and standards for school infrastructure is entirely reasonable, as is the call to implement clear plans to address the backlogs, from toilets to staff rooms, from libraries and internet connections to labs.

While the march was a lesson in democracy in action and a display of orderly and disciplined leadership, patience is starting to wear thin. While the posters announced "Education is light" or called for "Equal education for all!", some pupils chanted: "We want an answer, Minister!"

The march was about the future of education. So many years after June 16 1976, the current crop of schoolgoers has explicitly pledged that they must be the last generation to demand equality and quality in education. The demands for equality and quality are ironically inappropriate but sadly necessary so long after the sacrifices in Soweto.

The demands are about fairness and opportunities for all young people; about conditions in schools that are conducive to learning. Some 18% of South Africa's schools do not have access to electricity; 20% still do not have proper access to water. More than 92% do not have stocked and functioning libraries.

In the Eastern Cape, school nutrition and scholar transport were halted while officials mismanaged their budgets.



PUPIL POWER: Schoolchildren march to Parliament on Human Rights Day. Picture: NARDUS ENGELBRECHT/SAPA

Schools today are mostly unpleasant places, unsafe and poorly resourced. No wonder more than half our young people cannot read or count.

Organisations such as Equal Education represent a structured voice of the young still calling for the benefits of education.

Recently, Equal Education got

Zwehinzima Vavi of Cosatu to launch a "no-late-coming campaign" to get pupils to be punctual and in class. It has run summer camps and learning seminars to

develop youth leadership called "Equalisers", similar to Lovell's Groundbreakers or Soul City's Southbuddy.

The government sadly continues

to respond in lukewarm fashion. Not put off, pupils have called on Capetonians to donate books, have covered them at the Bookery book depot, and have opened libraries in three schools.

More than that, organisations and voices of the young intensify the need for urgent change. Such voices show that young people are ready, indeed desperate, to learn. These young voices call on politicians and officials to take responsibility and on teachers to teach better.

Magwena Mabileke, general secretary of the SA Democratic Teachers' Union, made the point at the Human Rights Day rally that parents, too, are crucial.

Around the country there are initiatives, and individuals, in public schools contributing to change. Principals like Dr Mdunduzi Mabe at Bhukulani High in Soweto or school teams at Mhlwi Secondary in rural Limpopo show that proper organisation and leadership can make a difference. Former-model C and independent schools remain beacons of achievement.

There are clusters of schools working with NGOs — as seen in Plettenberg Bay, Colesberg and Bodibe — which point the way to painstaking, multifaceted educational change.

These are examples of the enormous goodwill, experience and energy available to make a difference. Change will not happen overnight. In the toxic mix of factors that hinders our schooling, there is no one silver bullet that can magically fix it all. Some things, like spectacles or sanitary pads or health screening, can make a difference quickly.

Others, like proper teacher training and support, or better mathematics and literacy workbooks and their use, will come with focus and effort over years.

Officials will have to learn to give support at district level and to respond to parents, NGOs and opportunities to work in partnership on the ground.

The drive and energy of young people, their disciplined and determined voices, should inspire adults to make a difference and fix the broken schools.

● *Bloch is visiting adjunct professor at the Graduate School of Public Wits University. Dwane is co-ordinator of Equal Education.*

● On March 31, Equal Education will picket at the Union Buildings in Pretoria.