

Students break down race barriers

KEITH WATTRUSS reports on a weekend outing . . .

WHAT DO you get when you throw together for a weekend 56 Afrikaans, English and Xhosa-speaking scholars from the supposedly disparate communities of the "black, Chinese, coloured, Indian and white" people? Why, a microcosm of South African society, of course! And, not surprisingly, the epitome of harmony.

The objective of this type of outing, which was held in Port Elizabeth recently, is to remove scholars from their normal environments and place them with scholars of similar age but from different communities for a weekend. This enables them to communicate and interact with fellow pupils whom they would not ordinarily meet because of interferences and obstacles artificially created by legislation such as the Group Areas Act.

A carefully planned programme leads them through the awkward introduction phase into the phase when interaction becomes more relaxed and spontaneous. At all stages the process is monitored and facilitated whenever necessary. It is encouraging to notice how readily high school pupils adjust to an environment of this nature and the lingering thought is that if adaptation is so easy at this level why should it be any more difficult at all other levels?

The weekend outing in March followed a similar course to the very successful pioneering event arranged by IDASA in the Eastern Cape in June, 1988. This time 56 scholars boarded the bus in Port Elizabeth to set out for the Tsitsikama Lodge and the fact that a 48-seater bus was the transport, instead of the 60-seater which had been ordered, only served to hasten any break-down in barriers that might have been necessary! The noisily-singing bunch that tumbled out of the bus at Tsitsikama after their two-hour trip certainly showed no signs of estrangement (and that's putting it mildly!).

The scholars had been paired-off before they left Port Elizabeth and after supper on the Friday evening each person was given the opportunity of introducing their partner to all the others. This not only served as an "ice-breaker" but provided poignant insight into the often vastly-differing backgrounds of their colleagues.

The evening ended with the showing of two videos which dealt sensitively with the burdening questions of the alienated South African communities. As they watched the videos the scholars were asked to consider several questions:

- The similarities and differences in the experiences of the different communities

- The symbols of wealth and poverty focused upon in those communities and to what extent these represented reality
- Whether societies could be classified as "good" or "bad"
- Whether a common culture was possible in South Africa and
- Whether the videos gave them hope for the future.

Saturday morning began with the cacophony of a farmyard! The reason for this was that each scholar was individually handed a piece of paper which read "When you get the signal, make the sound of a . . ." and in the space provided was inserted one of seven different kinds of farm animal! When given the signal the scholars had to listen for those who were making the same sound as themselves and link arms with them. In this way they sorted themselves into working groups which they maintained for the remainder of the weekend.

An exercise was then given to each group, the design of which had as its purpose the teaching of co-operation rather than individualism. Keeping absolutely silent, participants were required to piece together different parts of a puzzle which required that they offer to others any parts in their own possession if they thought these parts would help the others to complete their puzzles. Success depended on their ability to gauge one another's needs and satisfy those needs by sacrificing their own.

Thereafter groups had to consider the questions posed to them while watching the videos the previous evening. These had to be discussed in their groups and attempts had to be made to reach consensus on the answers. These thoughts had then to be symbolically drawn onto paper-posters which were then placed on the walls of the lecture-room as reminders.

The morning session was brought to a close with a lecture by visiting educationist, Mr Peter Ranby of Sacred Heart College in Johannesburg. This informative and thought-provoking lecture addressed issues such as expectations from education, relevance of education if it is only for the "piece of paper" at the end, altruistic ideals being experimented with in education and educational requirements of a new South Africa. The freshness of many of Peter Ranby's ideas and approaches had his audience engrossed and for once they did not mind being late for a meal!

After lunch, the working groups were asked to go away and prepare a one-act play with the title "South Africa in 2010 —



Students portray their vision of the future in drama.



The group enjoys a walk along a mountain trail.

as we see it". This was to be enacted before all the others that evening. Late afternoon saw the scholars finally being let loose onto the volleyball courts, swimming pool and soccer fields, something which they had been yearning for since arrival. With some amusement we watched the young boy who had been wearing a T-shirt reading "I only play SACOS sport" decide how he fitted into this! His decision did not take long!

Saturday evening saw the production of the plays and what inspirational masterpieces they turned out to be. The sheer exuberance of the players once again made this the highlight of the weekend. With no dexterity they plunged headlong into the prickliest issues and, surprise, surprise, emerged unscathed on the other side. Another lesson had been learned — to solve a problem confront it rather than avoid it.

Sunday morning saw the scholars hiking along the many Tsitsikama mountain and river trails where the beauty of the setting was perhaps perfectly matched in the beauty of the friendships that had developed.

An environment so far removed from reality made it easy to achieve many of the objectives of the outing. But harsh reality was driven home again when the bus driver had to make a detour into the black townships to drop black scholars off in their area and when the Indian children all went back home to their demarcated suburb. Now the children saw how ridiculous such defining-lines were. And now hopefully they were better equipped to not only argue for, but also cope with change.

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