



THE **HUMANE** TRUST
EDUCATION
CAPE TOWN SOUTH AFRICA

NatureBased
EDUCATION
A DIVISION OF THE HUMANE EDUCATION TRUST

OPEN LETTER

28 January 2026

Kind Attention:

Hon. Minister Siviwe Gwarube

Minister of Basic Education, South Africa

cc Mr Johannes Wedenig, head of office, UNICEF(South Africa)

cc Khethani Hlongwa : Department of Social Development

cc Adv Sarah Roberts : Children's Commissioner Western Cape

*Children must be protected
from all forms of physical and
psychological violence and
from exposure to violence,
such as domestic violence or
violence inflicted on animals.*

RE: We respectfully request endorsement of our resources that support the intention and realisation of General Comment 26 Art 35 [\[GC26: 35\]](#) in the Child Rights Treaty.

Dear Minister,

I write as head of **The Humane Education Trust (HET)**, a charitable NGO and registered Public Benefit Organisation that has worked for more than three decades in an endeavour to bring about a kinder world through Life Skills and Life Orientation in the National Curriculum. As set out below, we believe our [Nature-based.Education](#) platform can be an essential component in your vision to 'strengthen foundations for a resilient and future-ready education system'.

Bringing an end to a culture of violence

Exploring the causes of school-based violence in South Africa, Sipho Sibanda's work was recently published by ScienceDirect.

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2950193825000932>

He concluded: "Violence prevention efforts should focus on teaching learners social and emotional skills and competencies to be able to withstand the broader socio-environmental influences."

To this end, the building of Empathy in learners becomes highly relevant.

Professor Simon Baron-Cohen is an award-winning clinical psychologist and Professor of Developmental Psychopathology at the University of Cambridge. He believes that nurturing the development of empathy gives the child a competency of immense value – an 'internal pot of gold'.

In his book *'The Science of Evil'* Professor Baron-Cohen speaks of the erosion of empathy as a critical global issue of our time. He asks if there is a scientific explanation for why people are cruel, and then goes on to explain that the word 'evil' should be substituted with the term 'empathy erosion'. He concludes that "Empathy is the most valuable social resource in our world... It is puzzling that in school or parenting curricula empathy figures hardly at all".

However, in a significant shift away from violence, several countries are now including Empathy as a subject in daily learning. Most recently Colombia passed a law that children are to be taught empathy for all living beings.

Without empathy we objectify the 'other', making them vulnerable to violence whether physical, emotional or psychological. Without empathy, learners who are exposed to violence step onto a slippery slide of...

- progressive desensitisation
- normalisation of violence
- decline of the empathy with which we are all born
- disruption of moral values
- acceptance of violence as normal
- participation in violence.

Results of a two-year Empathy project in the Western Cape

Indeed, right here on South Africa soil, a two-year empathy education programme conducted by The Humane Education Trust among Grade 3 learners at Forest Heights Primary School in the Western Cape, was so successful in awakening learner behaviour to the value of empathy, that it is included now in the up-coming *Palgrave Companion to Humane Education*, to be published this year.

The immense value of GC26: 35

Remedying the pandemic of violence in our schools and in society is, as you know, the cornerstone of GC26 Para 35. Underpinned by the knowledge that violence begets violence, GC26 Para 35 supports the evolution of a culture where no child is exposed to violence.

Back to the reason for our respectful request to you...

If the nurturing of empathy as one of the antidotes against violence, please endorse your support for our platform [Nature-based.Education](#) which is centred around the learning of empathy.

Our **Nature-based Education platform** offers a plethora of empathy-building resources (plays, charts and readers in six South African languages) as part of Life Skills/Life Orientation for Foundation and Intermediate Phase learners. All have been approved by your department.

Learning empathy, it is said, is as simple as learning to ride a bike

Several Ted Talks are emerging on YouTube suggesting that the learning of empathy is as simple as riding a bicycle. Like bike riding, it may start with support (training wheels) and require balancing, trial-and-error, and getting back on after falling. But the outcome is as strong and automatic as riding a bike!

Thank you for your consideration of this request to endorse our efforts towards the building of Empathy.

Kind regards

LOUISE VAN DER MERWE

Editor | *Animal Voice*

Managing Trustee | The Humane Education Trust

Director | Nature-Based Education, Cape Town, South Africa

Mobile | 082 457 9177

Email | education@naturebased.online | avoice@yebo.co.za

Website | www.naturebased.education

