

## **A Reflective Conversation with Jonathan David Jansen**

### **Kobus Maree**

*First of all, what are you currently working on, writing, or researching?*

A number of things, always. The most exciting of my current research projects is on leadership. I have been involved for a while on a long-term study on the leadership of transition in education contexts. Here I am particularly interested in what kinds of educational leadership emerge and are demanded in the kind of social transition that South Africa experienced. I take samples of leaders (such as former white school principals) that lead against the grain of community expectations to make their schools rich oases of cultural, language, social and racial integration—such as Diversity High (formerly JG Strijdom High School) in Alberton, Johannesburg. Since formal research is only part of my vocation, I am also compiling a book out of the range of media articles that I prepared over the years and through which I seek to address pressing social issues of concern—such as racism and reconciliation—in public forums. Other writing projects concern institutional culture change in higher education, authority and pedagogy in the classroom, higher education reforms, internationalization in higher education, metaphors of training and capacity building among high school principals, etc etc.

*How do you personally attempt to help the schools to work with gifted and talented children?*

By making schools and their constituents aware of the fact that there are many ways of being good; to stretch the notion of gifted beyond its academic meanings as performance on standardized tests in specific school subjects; to get schools to broaden the range of pedagogical and assessment measures that enable a larger pool of the gifted and talented to rise to the surface....by which I mean ALL children. I spend 1-2 days per week working directly with schools.

*Have you had mentors? How important do you see mentoring?*

My mentors came into my life unplanned, unexpected, unannounced. I often think I was extremely lucky: academic mentors, spiritual mentors, athletics mentors, life mentors. These persons were dotted across my 50 years in the most peculiar places; my spiritual roots tell me they were planted there, by higher authority. Each one of them played such an important role that kept me out of prison, an early grave, and a wasted life. I therefore see mentoring and mentorship as gifts that could make the difference to the quality and purpose of life of millions of youth in our country and beyond; without mentors, any society is at risk.

*Who has influenced you most and how?*

My Latin teacher. He came into my life as a junior high school student who was drifting into nowhere. He told me I had potential, and that word changed my life forever, even though I did not understand its meaning at the time. He was an excellent teacher, dedicated to his work, working far beyond the normal school hours, and investing his

time in the whole-child—he was my 800m coach as well as my Latin teacher. His energy and enthusiasm made me want to emulate him, and to become a teacher myself.

*Are there certain books that you have read that have been highly influential in your career/ life? What books do you recommend to colleagues and friends?*

Eva Holman's After Such Knowledge changed my life; it is a wonderful book on knowledge, memory, politics and transitions; about the problem of dealing with second-generation knowledge about a terrible past; her context is the Holocaust, but it applies perfectly to the post-apartheid order.

I know why the caged bird sings,  
A brief history of time,  
I write what I like,  
Black skin, white masks,

Maya Angelou  
Stephen Hawking  
Steve Biko  
Frantz Fanon

*How is the educational system in your country currently attempting to meet the needs of highly talented or gifted children?*

It does not. There is a version of egalitarianism that runs through the education policies of the South African state that believes that leveling teaching, learning and other technologies to some basic minimum of resource inputs is the ideology that should define government's role in education. In other words, nobody should stand out, or be preferred, except as they rise to some basic level of acceptable performance. The emphasis is on access and redress, not excellence and exceptionality; it is important to understand this ideology. In practice, of course, those schools with private resources and entrepreneurial parents will create opportunities for the highly talented....but they will tend to be white and middle class, and inside the best-resourced schools.

*How is the educational system in your country currently attempting to help parents?*

It does not, except to complain that parents are not as involved as they could/should be.

*As we approach the year 2010, what do you see as the challenges of educating highly intelligent children?*

The main challenge is to find and dig into the rich soil of those marginalized schools where some of our most talented scientists, literary theorists, engineers and poets lie hidden from view; and to bring those diamonds to the surface to shine.

*What question or questions have we neglected to ask?*

How a society, coming out of deep social and educational inequalities, can be led to understand that we need not make the choice between equity and excellence; in fact, equity is another way of achieving excellence.