

FEATURE**TEACHING THE WRONG STUFF IN A DANGEROUS WORLD**

Professor Jonathan Jansen
Dean of Education, University of Pretoria

When my son started Grade 1, he would wake up at four in the morning and, with great speed and alacrity, would wash, eat, dress and pack his bags out of sheer excitement about the day ahead. By the time this same child started high school, I would have to wrestle him out of bed to try to get him to school before four in the afternoon. Somewhere between Grade 1 and high school, our children typically move from being great enthusiasts for learning to becoming deeply disengaged from formal education. I have spent much of my time trying to understand why and how this natural thirst for learning among young children is so quickly lost after a few years inside this structure we call school.



Throughout South Africa, I have been privileged to address more than 30,000 students in the past five years: black and white, urban and rural, private and public and they all tell me the same thing, which I could summarise as follows: schools teach the wrong stuff.

One could argue, of course, that schools were never created to become fountains of knowledge, sources of invention or sites for the liberation of the mind. In fact, more than one historian has drawn powerful parallels between schools, mental asylums and the prison system. One has only to witness the regimentation of children in school, the common uniform, the colourless teachers, the humourless principal, and the inflexible security systems to wonder loudly about this quasi-prison environment. We pay for this, in more ways than one.

I partly share one view that schools as institutions are a set-up, a device to warehouse the children of working parents in order to control them and prevent trouble on the streets. I partly share another view that schools are places to reproduce the kind of class-based society we live in, allocating chances of success and failure with astounding (though not perfect) predictability that rich kids at affluent private schools make it big in the corporate world; poor kids in run-down township schools trawl the streets with meaningless certificates, provided they even get that far. What these children have in common, though, is that they were all taught the wrong stuff, and that very few of them were taught the kinds of things that enable them to thrive in a diverse and dangerous world.

When I talk in this direction at endless numbers of school gatherings, the audience normally splits down the middle. The one side thinks that this kind of speech is the best thing they could ever have heard. There is too much emphasis on competition, too much favouring of the kids who are talented in Maths and Science, too little focus on wholeness. The other side, whose children normally stride up to the podium struggling to carry all the trophies, absolutely hate what they hear. How dare the speaker rain on their child's parade? After all, their children worked hard to achieve these certificates and accolades; they won because they played by the rules. Yet it is precisely the rules of the game that worry me. What is it that we teach, why and with what consequences?

I have yet to meet students in my first-year class at the University of Pretoria who remember school teachers because of their skills at solving quadratic equations, their fluency in grammatical analysis, or their knowledge of the DNA double helix structure. They remember single teachers who made a difference in their lives. They tell moving stories of individual teachers who taught them about community, about caring, about compassion and about change.

I have yet to meet students in my first-year class at the University of Pretoria who remember school teachers because of their skills at solving quadratic equations, their fluency in grammatical analysis, or their knowledge of the DNA double helix structure. They remember single teachers who made a difference in their lives. They tell moving stories of individual teachers who taught them about community, about caring, about compassion and about change.

Most of our teachers, however, have succumbed to the mindless focus on curriculum trivia reinforced by competitive examinations that measure individual performance on a very narrow range of competences. It did not help, of course, that during the Asmal (Minister of Education) years, there was the real threat of exposure of failing schools in the media, on the one hand, and the tantalising prospect of being courted at the President's quarters if successful in those end-of-school examinations.

The pressure on teachers is relentless. One of my doctoral students, an accomplished mathematics teacher at a private school, lives in fear every year that she might not keep her job because the failure to get 100% maths passes in matric means, at worst, that she would not have her contract renewed and, at best, that she finds herself demoted to teach pre-matric classes and live through this humiliation among her peers.

Sadly, we have come to believe that matriculation results measure achievement. We accept without hesitation that these results represent fairness despite the so obvious fact that the inputs into a child's twelve years of schooling are so clearly differentiated by race and class. And we make devastating decisions about children's futures by reading off school examination results the potential of a learner for success in life.

Yet most university students I know (those kids with six distinctions in matric) have very little self-knowledge, hold very little respect for women, feel deeply uncomfortable in the presence of black people, display incompetence in African languages, lack basic knowledge of their continent, and fail miserably at (re-) solving complex social problems.

The demise of the inspection system under apartheid, coupled with our pursuit of reconciliation after apartheid, means that schools are not accountable for what they teach ... except through that indirect measure of performance, the Grade 12 examination. One of my students found that a school in Soweto and a school in Pretoria, using the same curriculum in the same subject (History) taught to the same grade level, had teachers who were teaching completely different things. The black teacher in Soweto taught about black concerns, the white teacher in Pretoria taught about Europeans. But they both taught for the examinations.

Given what we teach, it is no wonder that high school graduates are queuing up in record numbers to enter fields such as actuarial science, accounting and economics. They might not know what an actuary is, but they heard about the cut-throat competition for places and the huge amounts of money that can be made in these disciplines.

When I recruit school kids in Grades 10-12 in South African high schools, one of the most common reasons for not becoming a teacher is the salary. Somehow our schools with not a little help from the parents have conveyed to young people an understanding that to be successful is to make loads of money, to be educated is to maximise your number of subject distinctions, to be qualified is to be certificated.

Again, the parents have bought into this crass commercialisation of higher training. It is also not uncommon for me to find young people who wish to become teachers complain bitterly that their parents want them to study law or medicine or engineering... "Why waste your time becoming a teacher?" Yet it is these same parents that would want highly qualified teachers teaching their children provided it is not their precious ones doing the instruction. How selfish, if nothing else.

In the meantime, the world faces unprecedented levels of organised terror by both democratic Christian states as well as ruthless Islamic killers, all acting in the name of God. There is the real possibility, by the way, of an unprecedented clash of fundamentalisms (clash of idiocies?) that could tear our planet apart. At the same time as aggregate global wealth increases, inequalities between rich and poor nations have deepened, at pace. And climates change and environments collapse under the sheer weight of human greed.

Closer to home, while schools celebrate "a 100% pass in matric", their graduates run around Pretoria East beating up homeless and anonymous black citizens. Young people who should be in school, run rampant through our society killing and maiming at random. Babies are rendered homeless as HIV/AIDS sweeps through poor communities. Growing numbers of school-age children begin to over-populate the prison system. But you would not know this from the school curriculum, or by examining

what schools teach.

As it turns out, the 21st century workplace does not require automatons. It calls for persons who can work in teams, who can solve complex problems, who can reserve judgment, who are comfortable with difference, who can cross cultural and geographic boundaries, and who understand people. Of course mechanical skills matter and technical competence helps. But it is not enough in the modern workplace, and it is certainly dangerous in a complex and divided world. And there is no better place than South Africa in which to live these values and apply these skills.

I was invited recently to speak to the graduating matric class at a prestigious private school on the subject "South Africa Needs You." My dislike of the assigned topic could not be disguised. My political antenna, seldom wrong, interpreted the assignment as follows: kindly appeal to a group of upper middle class, mainly white, kids to please not leave black South Africa and employ their special skills to uplift this desperate developing country.

I, of course, did the opposite, by reminding these young people in this astoundingly well-draped school that South Africa did not need them. In fact, they need South Africa. They need South Africa to teach them humility, in the face of the arrogance of apartheid from which most of their parents were willing beneficiaries; to teach them service, in the face of overwhelming poverty made worse only by its visible existence alongside obvious wealth; to teach them community, in the face of deep racial divisions which simmer below the surface of this fragile democracy in which black men get thrown to lions and black workers get stuffed in washing machines.

The next day my email system was overloaded with positive messages from many parents; but I soon became aware of negative responses from others, including a very angry principal. What made this message unsettling is that it was not part of the curriculum, it was unfamiliar to the teaching programme, it was offensive to polite and comfortable middle class ears.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

A first thing to do is to begin by taking the pressure off schools to perform at all costs in these standardised, high-stake examinations. Here government can begin to work with teachers and ensure that there is much more emphasis on building strong foundations of knowledge during the early years of schooling rather than to concentrate interventions on the final grades.

The second thing to do is to broaden the range of performances that schools value, such as decency, citizenship, compassion and commitment. But for this kind of valuing to count among teachers and students, it should not be the kind of shame-you-were-not-good-at-anything-else award at the end of a ceremony. It should be a precondition for recognition and advancement among students, e.g. playing in the first team or becoming a prefect and perhaps even coming with a substantial bursary for further studies.

A third action could be to appoint within schools a life counselor for every student; I do not mean those one-time guidance counselors whose last period on a Friday was an opportunity to blow off steam. I mean someone whose fulltime work is to build the confidence, compassion, criticality, commonsense and courage of young people. The life counselor identifies potential leaders among the students and builds among them a sense of servant hood. The life counselor begins to bring students into contact with their brothers and sisters from communities which they think are different from them – a white middle class school working on an equal basis with black schools or poor students. This is the kind of action that government could well invest in as part of their personnel budgets, and that governing bodies of wealthy schools have the means to provide.

A fourth action could be to alter the performance appraisal of every teacher to include prominently the extent to which they make a difference in the lives of their children. If I were a principal, I would require every teacher to visit each of the 20-30 students in their form class in their homes. So, instead of the mathematics teacher being measured simply on the grounds of the number of matric higher grade passes in her subject, she now has to demonstrate the kinds of life investments that lift young people to become better citizens.

A fifth action could be to make service learning an official component of the curriculum. The Life Skills

component of the new curriculum sounds more like a necessary burden in many schools than a vital component of learning. Service learning would mean that at least once a year, students would be required to demonstrate through a well-structured portfolio an example of some form of service to a community and how such involvement enabled that young student to learn and grow.

Too many schools have a drop-off logic to their outreach programmes in which students fail to understand what it means to live amongst and learn from those who have less than them, if only in material terms.

My point, in sum, is this: every parent and citizen must realise three things. One, that many of our schools are doing little more than producing technical mastery on a narrow range of skills for a small minority of our population. Two, that such a narrow schooling fails to prepare students for complex and demanding national and global work contexts. And three, that skilled automatons operating in a dangerous and unequal world place us all at great risk. ●

Close Window