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It's time to face up to dismal reality behind matric euphoria

IN A BRILLIANT new documentary about a class of matriculants from a township high school in Cape Town, an American film-maker traces the lives, hopes and aspirations of these young black teenagers during and after their matric year.

It is a heartbreaking story, and nobody who watches this hour-long film will again interpret the matric results with the unrestrained exuberance to which we are treated every year.

Some of these young people come to school hungry everyday from the desperate poverty of their home and community; others raise smaller siblings in the absence of parents; several migrated to Cape Town from the even more dismal situation in the rural Eastern Cape; but all of them have one single goal in mind: to pass matric.

That having been achieved, they dream like all young people about going to university (doctors, engineers, public relations etc) and finding a good job. Unlike young people from the posh schools of Cape Town, their thoughts turn to how to support their families and how to help their siblings escape the suffocating poverty of their surroundings.

Their school is not great: the infrastructure has long crumbled, the teaching is sporadic and the material resources are in short-supply. Yet every teacher and pupil clings dearly to the myth that the matric certificate is an escape route from poverty. In anticipation, the community paints the examination hall and every desk is care-

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fully cleaned as the expectant youths are given a motivational send-off into the matric exams.

The results appear and the school is devastated. Most of the students fail, a few pass but pass so poorly that they are turned away at one of the elite universities in the city, a few enrol at the local university of technology, and most of them fail hopelessly in the first year. Needless to say, almost all of these once optimistic students remain unemployed.

The 2006 matriculation results read more or less like the Grade 12 results of every year since democracy came to South Africa. The majority of students who sit for the examination pass; a small percentage achieve endorsement (university entrance pass); very few write and even fewer pass mathematics and physical science on the higher grade; rural provinces with the largest enrolments fair worse than the large urban provinces; and the former white schools perform much better; on average, than the large majority of black schools.

This pattern is so well-established

that it is difficult to understand the media hype about an increase or decrease of a few percentage points from one year to the next; it simply does not matter except for one disturbing fact - that 12 years of annual matriculation results confirm that South Africa has settled for a pattern of two distinct school systems.

One system consists of a small group of former white schools that are increasingly deracialised, at least as far as students are concerned, and which account for the large percentage pass nationally and in provinces where such schools are dominant, such as in the Western Cape.

The other system consists of the large majority of schools, all black, and which together account for the fact that about one-third of students fail this high stakes examination.

The fact that individual black students sometimes appear in the top 10 or 20 of achievers in a province, or that individual black schools "turn around" their performance from one year to the next, makes no difference to the systemic picture: black schools are in serious trouble and there is little in policy or planning that suggests that this national pattern of two-school systems is about to be disturbed.

Unfortunately, the media often misses another simple point about the matriculation results: whether you fail or pass poorly, the consequences are more or less the same - you will be unemployed and no serious university will accept you.

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The senior certificate has no economic value today. No student finds a skilled job because she passed matric. That has been the case for at least 15 years. There used to be a time that the "JC" (junior certificate) got you a job; when that currency ended, the "SC" (senior certificate) got you places; that time too has ended.

Any work involving moderate levels of skill in a growing economy requires that the matriculant has further or advanced training. That is, the 21st century workplace, even in a developing country such as South Africa, requires much, much more than a senior certificate. It is best for a student who passes matric to understand that this paper means one thing only: he completed high school. And that is why passing well is the only thing that matters, not the mere fact that a student passed.

More disturbing is the other routine observation about this settled pattern of two schools systems.

The matric results confirm the simple link between resources and achievement, or between historical advantage and school results. For this reason I find quite despicable the ways in which the media and the politicians in the Western Cape report on their comparative advantage, year after year:

"Province leads the way" or in the more provocative language of an Afrikaans daily, "Weskaap weer bo-baas."

The matriculation results in this province have nothing to do with anything noble in the province other than the fact that it has a higher proportion of former white, privileged schools and a smaller proportion of so-called African schools than any other provincial education department.

Where this racial proportion is reversed, such as in the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal, the results predictably go the other way. It is this lack of acknowledgement of history, privilege, resources and

performance that disturb in the ways in which the annual results are reported.

But there is another concern overlooked in the hysteria accompanying the once-a-year ritual around the matric results - it is the failure to interrogate what our students actually know and can do as a result of 12 years of schooling.

In my many years as a university teacher, I am astounded by the inability of undergraduates to compose a grammatically accurate sentence, the lack of logic in arguments, the emotional outbursts in writing and, most importantly, the incapacity to think creatively when faced with routine problems. How on earth did these students pass a matriculation examination? Or, more importantly, what exactly does the matriculation exam actually measure?

Before long, there will be another new ritual playing itself out in the media, as it has regularly in the past three years - the number of students who drop out from university.

In the universities that admit more and more students without matriculation endorsement, the failure and dropout rates are extremely high; in other words, by admitting large numbers of students who pass poorly - no doubt a source of subsidy income for weak universities - the limited value and meaning of the matriculation examination is again exposed.

The government is faced with a serious problem. On one hand, it wishes to raise the

standard of the matriculation examination so that it functions as a serious measure of learning performance at the end of 12 years of schooling.

On the other hand, by raising the standard, more and more students will fail to pass or pass so poorly that their life chances are sunk anyway. The trick of course is not to change the matriculation standard; rather, the task is to raise the level of school quality.

The only way to disturb this pattern of two unequal school systems is to do something radical, and to do it quickly.

A first action might be to ensure that every school has the minimum of resources to function well enough to deliver quality education. A second action must be to ensure that every matric teacher is competent to teach her subject. A third action could be to redeploy principals who, despite receiving resources and support, still operate dysfunctional schools.

With every generation of matriculation students who have their hopes dashed in the matric year, in the labour market, and at university, we add to the swelling numbers of disillusioned young people roaming the streets of South Africa.

The next time the middle classes complain about crime, it might be useful to reflect on one of the source of desperation that leads to an increasingly violent and intolerant post-1994 South Africa.

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