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# Dumb and dumber – meet the class of 2006

Young people are leaving school without reading or numeracy skills thanks to a system obsessed with pass rates and matriculation symbols, says **Jonathan Jansen**

**I**T IS NO SECRET that South Africa's 30 000 schools remain in crisis. Once again, the latest international mathematics and science study comparing 50 countries, places South Africa in a familiar place – last.

This is even when we are compared with nations with a lower GDP, fewer research universities, less governmental capacity and low-growth economies.

Any employer will confirm that high school graduates now need basic training before they can be deployed to specific tasks; any university will confirm that first-year students might have promising school symbols, but lack the requisite knowledge and skills to meet the intellectual demands of the higher education environment.

What is absent are foundational skills – such as reading competently, writing accurately and speaking fluently.

Lacking, too, is basic numeracy – the basic ability to work with numbers, such as performing simple computations and interpreting graphs, as well as basic literacy, and basic computer literacy.

**Prof Jonathan Jansen is Dean of the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria**

Employers and academics find that pupils have a short supply of attitudinal attributes such as persistence, confidence, discipline, integrity and determination.

## Complain

An incapacity to do basic bibliographic searches or to function within a diverse team or to solve simple and complex problems, are other deficits the government, universities and employers routinely, and rightly, complain about.

What South African pupils are good at is memorising meaningless knowledge; regurgitating archaic formulas or disconnected historical events; and cramming for endless exams.

There is so much dumbing down of young people in the education system, a function of an obsession with pass rates and matriculation symbols, that any chance of deep learning and skills acquisition has been displaced by a mindless competi-

tion among schools about who gets the best Grade 12 results.

No one noticed that, while year after year, political attention was focused on examinations at the end of school, there were disturbing research findings from some provinces that the foundations of schooling in the early years were disintegrating.

One longitudinal study even suggested that the longer children stayed in school, the less mathematics they knew.

The policy implications of such research findings would be humorous if they were not tragic. This is not, in one sense, a race problem.

In my experience, it is as serious a problem for students coming from the well-equipped, former white schools as it is for students from poorly-resourced black schools.

Yet in another sense, the problem is compounded for those pupils from schools with a poor learning culture. These are schools where there is no predictable timetable, where teachers lack in-depth knowledge of their subjects, where attendance is sporadic for pupils and teachers, and where parents are undemanding.

But if things are bad for high school graduates generally, then it is a crisis for students from

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black township schools.

This explains why, to this day, white high school graduates are more likely to find (or create) jobs after school than their black counterparts.

There is growing evidence that the so-called "deracialised middle classes" come from schools that encourage teaching and learning that lets both black and white students succeed, at least in the formal requirements of passing exams at the upper end of the performance scale.

Nevertheless, the most destructive aspect of schooling in South Africa is the national examination system, for it remains a powerful symbol of the kinds of things parents, teachers and even universities value from the schools.

What is valued are spectacular matric results. Schools place these results on their websites; principals proudly rattle off the number of exemptions at each prize-giving ceremony; provincial MECs invite the pupils with the highest averages to expensive ceremonies on the lawned landscapes of some government mansion; newspapers offer a parade of "six or more distinction" faces on their front pages; and university marketing officers place exorbitant scholarships at the feet of overwhelmed youngsters who cannot believe the attention that comes with this kind of success.

Young people respond to these adult signals of what is important by then engaging in what can only be described as moronic behaviour - like taking eight or 10 or 12 (and sometimes more) subjects to see how many of these they can pass with distinction. My own view is that such pupils should be barred from higher education for they display behaviours inimical to advanced learning.

All of us are guilty of participating in these charades, of playing these examination games, of putting pressure on our children to comply with these institutional demands.

To now complain that schools are not delivering the basic skills complement for a growing economy smacks of hypocrisy.

### Spectacle

It will take a massive cultural shift and enormous political courage to end this spectacle and to begin a national debate on what's worth learning in the first place - and then to make these findings the focus of new assessment plans.

The future of skills development depends on one factor only: the quality of the school system.

If the schools fail, the economy fails. If the schools falter, our democracy is vulnerable.

If the schools produce weak graduates, the higher education system is seriously weakened.

If the schools do not produce the suite of (hard and soft) basic skills required for entering the labour market, then a high skills path to development will remain a pipedream.

If the schools cannot provide young boys with a meaningful education, then the chances of turning around crime statistics are even more remote.

Not a single one of the Asian Tiger economies was able to achieve its spectacular growth without making education and training central to their strategies for national development.

It is a lesson South Africa has yet to learn.