

Education is surely everybody's favourite gift for their children. In an ideal world children go singing to school, knowing a treasure chest of knowledge and new experiences await them. They enjoy education, which according to the dictionary means receiving systematic instruction for the development of character and mental powers. Sounds good, doesn't it!

Anyone who has had the privilege, or misfortune, as the case may be, to attend an old-style sporting school may have experienced the interesting phenomenon of the head boy/girl invariably exhibiting bulging biceps with superb balance, whilst the genius student has a sole moment of glory after school has broken up and the exam results appear in the local paper. Here education has clearly concentrated on character, to the detriment of mental powers.

Then there is the large number of schools, worldwide, where neither character nor mental powers are systematically developed. If reports are to be believed, their main outcomes are low reading and arithmetic skills, negativity to further learning, depression and a solid dose of antisocial behaviour.

Education in South Africa is in crisis. Last country ranking in TIMMS 2003 for reading, maths and science by 15 year olds; last country ranking in PIRLS 2006 for reading by 10 year olds, skills shortage crippling Escom and the country; new teacher output frighteningly inadequate; the fundamental maths and communication unit standards for adult education not-fit-for-purpose; violence - the list is only too well known by now. But it really hurts when one hears that immigrant children from Zimbabwe, Kenya and Nigeria strongly outperform their South African counterparts. What is going on?

It is instructive to consider the Japanese education system. They have reformed their curriculum in 2002 and again in 2006, even though they are consistently near the top of school maths and science rankings. The change in 2002 was about achieving some independence for teachers in their choice of teaching method, more creativity from learners and lastly more free time for learners. In 2006 greater emphasis was put on love and loyalty for Japan and on respect for traditional culture. Primary schools may be close to an ideal situation, with focus on all subjects in a well-rounded education in inclusive classes, with team work and learner interaction paramount. However, higher schooling suffers from heavy emphasis on academic success, causing too much unhappiness, loss of motivation, bullying and relatively poor results. And they do not have even a hint of our Outcomes Based Education (OBE) with its misguided quest for nebulous outcomes full of academic drizzle.

The recipe for better schooling in South Africa is thus no surprise: Copy Japan in Primary School and do better in High School. In effect this means drastic changes are necessary: Abandon Outcomes Based Education and write a curriculum with clear academic targets; provide learning material which gives a strong guide to teachers; cater for teacher and learner creativity and fun; recognise that academic performance is only one facet of the development of character and mental powers; have inclusive classes until age 13 comprising learners with different talents ; and offer a well-rounded education including the subjects arithmetic and science, language, arts -, physical -, moral-, culture - and environment education. After age 13 more and more specialisation can occur, as happens in many countries overseas.

A lot more can be said, for instance about making children more confident, for instance

#ff0000;"><strong>promoting emotional intelligence</strong></span>, hobbling the ♦holy cow♦ academic success, making education really accessible to all, better training and payment of teachers, ♦ how to cater for the needs of country, work place and home, ♦ the impact of the school experience on consumerism and materialism, and probably much more, but wouldn't it be great just to make a start by getting a more sensible curriculum?</p> <p>♦</p> <p>And yes, whilst maybe not statistically significant, the three ♦ other African countries mentioned do not have OBE</p>