

“ OBE education system produces confident illiterates ”

New findings show schools are turning out millions of illiterate and innumerate teenagers, and point the finger at the education system

Extract from article by Janet Smith in Saturday Star – 15 August 2009

Another damning new report appears to confirm that many of our children are doomed when it comes to maths in general, never mind its toughest component.

The final pilot phase of the National Benchmark Tests Project, which was made public this week, deepens the scandal over the education system in general. It makes it clear that not only do pitifully few first year students at universities have the mathematical skills required in higher education, most do not even have the literacy skills.

One daily newspaper went so far as to use the headline “SA gets dumber and dumber”.

It’s a critical study released at an important moment as it is not long since President Jacob Zuma correctly saw fit to split the education ministry into two – Basic education under minister Angie Motshekga and higher education under Blade Nzimande.

Some 13000 students across seven campuses were tested in the five-year project commissioned by Higher Education South Africa (Hesa) after universities began to express concern at “extremely high” failure rates.

The study was also meant to try and fathom the meaning of the National Senior Certificate (NSC), which is the new matric.

A staggeringly low 7 percent of the students who wrote the maths tests were found to be proficient. In other words, they would not need extra help to pass their exams. About 73 percent had “intermediate” skills. The rest, 20 percent, had only the most basic skills and would need long-term, consistent attention.

So much then for the dream of building a nation of engineers, scientists and doctors.

The benchmark tests undoubtedly expose holes in the government’s argument that the many students getting more than 70 percent in the NSC maths exam are a sign of success. And it gets worse. At least 7 percent of the students who wrote the benchmark tests have only basic skills in English – the medium of instruction. Nearly half have only intermediate skills. So the study indicates most students need support, some of them “extensive” support, simply in language development.

At least two education ministers and dozens of MECs have optimistically claimed success for both outcomes based education (OBE) and the NSC, insisting that results for Grade 12 have genuinely improved and that, therefore, education standards are on the rise. Unconvinced, analysts and academics have mostly disagreed with the politicians.

That the matric pass rate is higher, or the average marks are higher, or more teenagers are getting exemption and thus entering university, certainly does not mean that our education system is in a good state of health.

Yet it still depends on whose side you're on as to what gets the blame for the heartbreaking results of the benchmark tests.

Many observers and educators insist it is OBE, the controversial education system implemented in the 1990s with the ideal of tackling the needs of a post-democratic, non-racial and non-sexist society. Although many schools, sometimes desperately, embraced it, it has been long described as woefully out of step with realities of democracy.

Ten years ago, much-respected academic Jonathan Jansen – now the rector of the University of the Free State but then in the Macro-Education Policy Unit at the University of Durban Westville – stated in a key paper that the status of education in South Africa militated against sophisticated curriculum reforms such as OBE.

He worried that the language and concepts were too complex, confusing and often contradictory. He feared that OBE policy was based on flawed assumptions about what happens inside the average classroom. And he was concerned that there was “something fundamentally questionable about a focus on the ends, when much of the educational and political struggle of the 1980s valued the process of learning and teaching as ends in themselves”.

Jansen's most critical query was: what is education for? He argued against “bland, decontextualised, global statements which will make very little difference in a society emerging from apartheid and colonialism”, and warned that OBE would require far more parental support and involvement, which would be very difficult for too many.

It is unfortunately true that the system has spawned bureaucratic nightmares with its constant assessment requirements for exhausted and underpaid teachers. This has been borne out in countless staffrooms.

And despite government denials, experts like Jansen remain true to their concern that if OBE was enforced without enough training for teachers and without true success under similar conditions anywhere else in the world, it would remain on shaky ground.

As the system was preceded here by miserable decades of inadequate, unequal, unjust schooling, it was obvious, say its detractors. OBE was a recipe for horrible failure.

Indeed, there are two clear points of view on the matter from those on the outside looking in at the government's revolutionary and bombastic attempts to restructure education. They differ dramatically from at least a decade of *ipso facto*, state-sponsored defensiveness.

The one opinion is expressed by Aslam Mukadam, co-ordinator of the Cape-based Concerned Maths Educators (CME) and a passionate patriot who has taught for more than 27 years. He says the bench mark tests results are symbolic of “a major crisis”. And he is very straightforward about it: OBE is to blame. It is an education system that produces “confident illiterates”.

Another opinion is articulated by Professor Jill Adler of the mathematics department at Wits University. She says “the location of the problem at the moment is the gap between a

modernised curriculum and the realities on the ground”. But she has a different take on the children emerging out of OBE – “and it’s coming at a level of identity”.

Adler says “the kids are much better than they were, they are more confident, they are more aware of what they do and don’t know and they are more willing to try”.

It is important that Mukadam and Adler are of one mind on one thing – that at least a century of self-loathing could finally be over. But how will Zuma’s education tsars now match that much-improved self-concept with an education system that will truly test its mettle and situate this country among the best in the world?

Mukadam says we must look at what the universities are saying, “and we must face up to the fact that many of our matriculants can’t read, write and comprehend”. For him, OBE “is definitely responsible”.

“It was the way in which it was set up, without teachers being properly trained or just being given crash courses. But more than that, OBE is resource-based. It requires students to access libraries and the internet, so those schools and children who do not have access have remained marginalized”.

“From that alone, if a person looks holistically at it, it was bound to fail – from the beginning,” says Mukadam.

“When it comes to schools where there are resources, we have been pumping our students with assignments and projects and giving them lots of confidence because they can get stuff off the internet and produce work without much effort at all”.

“ Even their parents are plagiarisers. In many cases, their parents are ‘doing’ their assignments – well, they are getting information off the internet for their children. And while all this makes the kids feel great because they get good marks, they are not in the least bit well-read or even understanding what they are doing”.

“Finally, this is now evident. When they get to university, they can’t cope. Kids ask a lot of questions, which is the way they are being taught in OBE, but really they don’t know much at all”.

Adler says “closing that gap is a systemic endeavour”. She believes the government acknowledged many of the mistakes of the original OBE in its more recent revised version, and that the revision brought it much closer to a focus on content – to the extent that its current curricula mirrors curricula elsewhere.

But she still has great concerns. “ We live in an increasingly technologised world, so when we speak specifically of maths, we have to understand that the profession is about more than the execution of procedures. Preparing the teaching force is vital, and this is the kernel of the problem. What is demanded of a teacher is much deeper appreciation of the nature of mathematics, and this means not simply being able to carry out a set of well-known principles.

“If we want children who understand better and perform better, independently, we need to give teachers a sufficiently varied and longitudinal experience so that they have successes along the way. This sense of failure among them mustn’t be perpetuated”.

“Teachers should be given a minimum of six years to learn and implement what they have learned before they can really achieve. This is a professional training and we don’t expect doctors or lawyers to fly at the beginning.”

Yet for teacher Siphon Vilakazi, there is always great hope. The North West representative of the Association for Mathematics Education of South Africa says that while the results of the benchmark tests are upsetting, teachers are very aware that they play only a part in what happens in the classroom.

The children themselves, and their own ambition, also have to keep the hope alive, no matter what education system is in place.

“You remember those learners who can work on their own and do their own investigations. And those are the ones who will inevitably achieve. It’s not always about something you can teach them in the classroom. The ones who want to make a go of their lives are the kinds of learners who will use mathematics, for example, to come up with their own solutions, to make conjectures, to generalise. And it is those ones who make their own time to do their own studies.

“As a teacher, you love that.”