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Deputy editor of Sunday Times misses the mark as he exposes his lack of understanding of the basic education sector

by Elijah Mhlanga, 07 April 2021

It is unfortunate and disappointing that senior journalist, Mr Mike Siluma, currently the Deputy Editor of Sunday Times, had to tangentially implicate the schooling system as an element that perpetuates mediocrity in the South African society. In trying to fortify his opinion about the poor showing by the Bafana Bafana squad which has resulted in their exclusion from the African Cup of Nations, in his column published in the Sunday Times this past Sunday (4 April 2021), Mr Siluma incorrectly compares the education sector's strategies to strengthen the attainment of educational outcomes to sports. . It is clear that he does not understand what education is all about and hence the comparison between sport and education is off the mark.

One of the fundamental differences between competitive sport and education is that competitive sport is about producing winners and hence the focus is on the best talent in the country. Education on the other hand is all inclusive and is about developing every single child to their full potential, irrespective of home background and other limiting factors. It is for this reason that there are different benchmarks or gradation of performance in education, used to establish where learners are and where they need to get to.

The threshold of 30% and 40%, was explained on numerous occasions to all journalists, as the minimum level of achievement and it is by no means the targeted level of achievement. We were also at pains to explain that no learner will attain a certificate, if he/she achieves a 30% in all seven subjects taken at the Grade 12 level. This minimum level of achievement is to prevent learners who, for one reason or the other, may not be able to perform at the required levels in one subject from being held back simply because of that one subject. The schooling system promotes excellence at every level, and we are continuously monitoring the percentage of learners that attain distinctions and those that attain admission to bachelor studies, which are the higher levels of achievement in the system. Education is about taking the entire population of learners from where they are to the next level.

The writer has also alluded to learners being "progressed", if they do not meet the standard, as another example of mediocrity. What the writer is unaware of is that the policy on progression is based on very stringent criteria and on the principle that it does not make sense to retain learners in a grade after repeated non achievement. Very often the repeated failure in a grade is based on one or two subjects that the learner is struggling with. These learners are identified and are provided with remedial support and many of them have excelled in the Grade 12 examination in the last few years. Progressed learners produced 1 592 distinctions in the 2020 NSC examinations. This is but one bit of information to demonstrate that the policy on progression is working and is not about lowering standards. The Department of Basic Education is doing its best to accommodate all learners that perform at different levels, in different subjects and in different spheres of development.

Contrary to the belief of the writer, schooling is about identifying the hurdles and obstacles in a learner's trajectory of progress from one outcome to the other. Where schools do not perform, or learners do not perform as expected, the reasons for the poor performance is



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interrogated and principals and teachers are brought to account, and parents and learners are also brought into consultation sessions with the school, to identify the weakness and a programme is put in place to address the problem. There is no dropping of standards as alleged by the writer, but rather learners and schools are supported to achieve the standard.

The writer is correct when he says that administrators need to discover and nurture talent; and that is an area that the Department has already started work in with the implementation of the three-stream model. To cater for the varying talents of learners and also assist others cope with schooling, the model allows learners to take different pathways that offer high quality learning opportunities, as required by the NDP 2030.

In conclusion, it needs to be mentioned that the likes of Professors Glenda Gray, Shabir Madhi, Mosa Moshabela, Salim Abdool Karim and even Trevor Noah, have gone through the South African schooling system, which has catapulted them on to the world stage and therefore the South African schooling system cannot be used as an excuse on entrenching mediocrity.

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