

Children in eSwatini question purpose and value of education.

BY BHEKI MAKHUBU

While the government's annual recruitment drive of young men and women into the army is to be welcomed as a noble gesture not just to beef up state security, but also to employ an emerging generation of emaSwati that needs to be absorbed into the economy, the interest taken by school children to participate in this exercise should, however, worry us as a nation.

The recruitment exercise is happening right in the middle of the Form III and Form V external examinations. What is beginning to emerge is that some of these children, who have attained the minimum age requirement for entry, are also throwing their names in the hat by abandoning these important examinations that will define the rest of their lives to run the 3.2km distance required to qualify to join the Umhlobo Eswatini Defence Force (UEDF), if they win or come second.

While there are no reports that these school children have already walked away from this most important point in their lives, that they have taken the time, even temporarily, to shift their focus away from school to the army recruitment exercise is, in itself, an abandonment of a lifelong journey that they began at least 12 years ago as a means to define the rest of their lives.

Nobuhle Mbhamali, 18, of Nduway'thini, is writing her JC examinations this year at Oslo High School. She, however, took time off to participate in the race to become a soldier under the Sigwe Inkundla because, as she told the media, "Nowadays, there is no difference whether you're educated or not. Everyone comes back to stay at home because of unemployment. I've been offered a job opportunity, and I will grab it."

That children in eSwatini are starting to question the purpose and value of education should give us all reason to pause and reflect on what has gone wrong with our society. True, we live in very tough economic times where jobs are scarce, but to allow our children to give up on education is not the solution to the country's myriad of problems.



Bheki Makhubu, editor of The Nation Magazine.

What happened to the power of education in eSwatini?

To say that education has lost its value simply because there are fewer job opportunities for those who attain it would be lazy thinking.

For instance, in a society where education is well-founded with deep roots, Nobuhle and many like-minded children could have bid their time and then entered the contest to join the army once she had at the very least, completed high school. But, as she said, there is no point in waiting. Education has lost its value and purpose to her and like-minded children.

In a normal society, this spectre of children opting to drop out of school to join the army to secure their future at the tail-end of their educational journey would be a red flag that would require its own national dialogue. It is in these situations where experts in education, economics, socio-political welfare and other related areas should be called upon to offer their opinions on how to stem this destructive tide in our country.

But we are no longer a nation that speaks to itself.

When one looks around, what emerges is that we have become a society whose leaders do not take kindly to being educated on the dangers that lie ahead and listening to possible solutions on how to avoid the catastrophe that will befall us if we allow our children to abandon education.

For instance, nobody has raised a hand to warn about the dangers of the army doing its recruitment drive at this crucial time of examinations. In a country that has become intolerant of freedom of expression, those who may have foreseen this problem have chosen to stay silent for self-preservation, rather than contribute towards nation-building by pointing out the flaws in distracting our children from an important educational process.

But, as already pointed out, some children, even those who don't get to qualify, have taken an interest in joining the army by running a few kilometres means children in the country do not value the education they are expected to attain. They go to school only because they are expected to. That is what should worry us.

This country does have experts who can interrogate why children no longer care to go to school and complete their high school education. What we need is the opening of the channels to discuss this crisis.

There was a time when eSwatini was the envy of the Southern African Region for offering the best quality education. We now seem to be on a downward spiral when our children do not have any appreciation for school. We need to open the gates of freedom of expression so that we can discuss this problem that could explode in our faces.