

School not for sissies

Jonathan Jansen | 10 November, 2011 00:11



During the early years I was hopeless at everything in school. I was the first boy in the history of my school to be lapped in the 400m race. "How," you ask, "is that possible when this is a one-lap race?"

Well, the winner caught up with me on his victory lap. At one stage my mathematics marks were negative integers; those were the days of negative marking where they actually deducted marks for wrong answers.

Imagine if they applied that method of marking today; they would have to invent symbols below H in many of our schools. The highest marks I achieved in primary school were for a category on the report card called Neatness.

My music teacher was no help. She approached me one day with what I initially thought was encouragement: "With your voice, Johnny, you can go far."

I lapped up the praise, but then came the unforgettable let down: "The further the better."

I hated woodwork because, in Standard 6, everybody had to do this "practical" subject. I was just not good with my hands. The project for that year was to build an ashtray with some kind of mast in the centre to pick it up, and a half-hollow copper bowl in the middle.

At the end of the year I rushed home and woke up my mother, who was doing night shift later that evening as a nurse in the local hospital.

She was clearly irritated that I broke one of the house rules about night-shift sleep during the day, but damn, I had just completed my design masterpiece.

She rubbed her eyes, saw my white teeth in the dark bedroom, and knew she had to praise my project: "What a lovely boat, my boy!"

I crushed the bloody ashtray; who needs one in a non-smoking home?

I found my greatest learning outside the classroom. I was the Toweel (the surname of a famous boxing promoter family) of my primary school, organising regular fights after classes between the biggest boy from the Afrikaans class and the equivalent Goliath from the English class. Somehow the Boer-Brit language struggles found its way into my school.

I would set the time and the place and decide the winner. Bloody noses were common. Then one day, without telling the Toweel-wannabe, the two giants decided to turn on the promoter and beat me up for fun. The non-paying crowd collapsed in laughter, and there were no more fights after that.

For the most part, however, my mother made sure I hung out with the right crowd. She would warn us routinely with this hurtful expression: "I don't want you coming home with every Tom, Dick and Harry!"

My problem was that these were exactly the names of three of my closest friends: Archie Dick, Tom Jardine, and Harry Solomons.

Life was tough under Sarah, my mother's biblical name, who was married to that Old Testament patriarch, Abraham, whom together bore a son named Isaac. See-ree-yus. So I went out looking for friends with names like Methuselah, Beelzebub and Epaphroditus.

My dark skin was a mixed blessing at school. On the one hand, I could not prove to my parents that the teacher beat me black and blue; I was black and blue.

On the other, I discovered early that one of the few advantages of being black was that you could not blush. Like the time when a Standard 3 girl I set my sights on suggested I close my eyes for my first kiss ever; when I opened my eyes five minutes later, I was surrounded by a dozen of her girlfriends scattered on the grass, laughing. School was rough, man.

So to all the pupils writing examinations and feeling the pressure of adults on you at this time of the year, I want you to know that school is much more than tests and marks. I want you to enjoy all the other fun things that you experience and that you will remember long after you leave school.

Your teachers mean well, and they genuinely do care about you. Your friends at school will become your friends for life. Your parents obviously want the best for you, even though it doesn't feel like that at the moment.

Most of all, see the funny side of life and of school for, no matter what marks you get, it is not worth