

# Panting with pants at my knees proves point

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The school hall of Livingstone Kolobeng College was packed with high school learners on this cold Gaborone afternoon. The children looked tired and bored after a routine day of classes and exams.



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Photograph by: Times LIVE*



*Children must be encouraged to do what they excel in and enjoy  
Photograph by: THULI DLAMINI*

**" I run the last metres in what instantaneously becomes a sack race. She edges ahead and wins. The noise is deafening"**

Change of tack as I drop my regular stump speech for student recruitment here in Botswana.

"Students, what is the one thing you are really, really good at?"

They begin to show signs of life.

"No really, what is the one thing you do well?"

I tell the now-alert youth that each of us has one thing that we can be proud of, and that we do better than anything else.

For some it is playing the violin and for others it is a game of chess. Not all children do well in mathematics and science; some excel in painting and the performing arts. Some children have the skill of listening empathetically, or they simply stand out in the church choir.

"Find that one thing," I tell the children, "and you can change your life forever."

There is now a slight buzz in the large school hall and I move from desk to desk with the roving microphone, and place it suddenly in the face of an unsuspecting kid.

"So, what are you really good at?" I ask a round-faced, smiling junior high student.

"I am the school sprinter."

"You're on," I say, and together we move to the one end of the hall as excited children clear desks on each side of what is transformed into an 80 metre-long athletics track. Another child grabs the microphone with the instruction to count to three. I have to tighten my belt for this unexpected sprint competition, a futile exercise as you will discover in a minute.

Dust goes up everywhere as we take off down the solid concrete passage with cheering pupils on each side. I am aware that I am ahead by a few centimetres. As the wall comes closer on the other side, I start to slow down, and at that very moment disaster strikes. My pants fall to my knees.

There is roaring laughter as cellphone cameras click. I grab at my knees, lift the uncooperative trousers, and run the last metres in what instantaneously becomes a sack race. She edges ahead and wins. The noise is deafening.

There is a reason many children are bored in school. Achievement is too narrowly focused on academics. There will always be youngsters who do better than their peers in school subjects. That is their motivation to keep doing better and to see the future more optimistically than the rest.

But good schools provide many different outlets for children to perform (that is the right word) and find their strengths.

If you are a teacher reading this today, as I know many across the country do, try this exercise.

Ask every student to write on a piece of paper the one thing they think they really do well and enjoy doing. You might want to give a few examples to get them going.

What should happen is that you provide the young learners with opportunities to practise what they do well. Encourage them to develop that talent.

For the young sprinter in this story I would find local competitions and encourage her (and her parents) to compete and test her strength against other runners. Do not fit all students into one form of competition - tests and examinations in school subjects. Rather, let them grow in the direction of their talents.

What a child wants to do is not necessarily what a parent wants them to do. A student who excels in sculpture or dance will be nudged in the direction of what a parent sees as a more lucrative career option in accountancy or actuarial science.

"It is your life to live," I tell young people. "Do what you feel you excel in and enjoy."

In my life as a teacher I've seen so many young lives transformed by recognition, being noticed for what you're good at doing. Simply by giving recognition and support for other talents, these students then pay more attention to the normal business of schools - learning in the subject areas.

I will not easily forget that smile of being recognised as one student in a large school as we handed the sprinter her award for beating the visitor from South Africa. I then called around for a tailor.

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