

Art is the solution to SA's 'decade of action' in education and re-skilling

 By Ntombi Malaza

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Within the World Economic Forum's recently launched Reskilling Revolution Platform to upskill current work forces, lies an opportunity for African leaders to collaborate and include the reconfiguration of primary education, as a critical focus in ensuring that future generations benefit and that the continent remains globally competitive. The re-introduction of art in schools is one such essential starting point to instilling the requisite skills necessary to the next entrants of higher education students being ready for the modern economy - of the fourth industrial revolution.



Vusi Mfupi at St Martins De Porres, for the Room 13 Inspiration Day in Soweto.

South Africa is ranked 80th out of 82 countries in the education access category, as well as the education quality and equity category. In turn, the country boasts the highest unemployment levels in the rankings, anchored by an unemployment rate for citizens with a basic education of 33.3%, and for those with intermediate education of 28.5%.

The stakes are even higher

WEF's Reskilling Revolution Platform may be rooted in the premise that without action, the next generation will be ill-prepared for the needs of the future, which creates risks for both productivity and social cohesion. But for South Africa, the stakes are even higher if the country does not seize this opportunity to find equal footing and emerge with a workforce able to practice soft skills that will get the economy back on track as it becomes globally competitive again.

With creativity and empathy considered as important as artificial intelligence (AI) as skills of the immediate future, the country is already seeing a growing disconnect between education systems and the labour markets. Today's learners face a paradigm shift as they become students gearing up for new job types that do not yet exist, with an increased pressure on both digital and social-emotional skills in the coming years.



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TBWA\South Africa, through its work with Room 13 South Africa – a school-based network of arts studios that is about developing and empowering children to become the best that they can be, acknowledges that visual arts teach learners about developing their self-esteem, finding a sense of purpose, and in expressing themselves.

Making meaningful progress

Locally, the advantage of seeding these vital soft skills organically within the school curricular is missed and resultant in the country's stumbling block of being on the back foot of technology. While South Africa's global competitiveness remains impaired by escalating electricity and connectivity issues, the guiding philosophy of Ubuntu makes natural to its citizens the soft skills, required to catch up and get ahead.

If public and private sector leaders come together to co-create education systems that deliver on learners' needs for the future and look to scaling programmes such as Room13 South Africa through the ministries of both basic and higher education.



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In making meaningful progress in reskilling the world and for South Africa to becoming commercially viable, it is especially important to focus on the fastest-growing jobs of the future. A concurring report from WEF notes that much of the anticipated job growth will come from the seven professional areas of care, engineering and cloud computing, sales marketing and content, data and AI, green jobs, people and culture, and specialised project managers.

All of which are benchmarked through an inherent application of creative thinking and empathy to the bigger picture. The early development of motor skills, language skills, social skills, decision-making, risk-taking, and inventiveness, which can be taught and instilled through art instruction, is essential to meeting the demands of the new global market.

Marketplace for connectivity

Playing its part, each Room 13 studio is run by an Artist-in-Residence (AiR) who facilitates the activities, based on their own skills and the interests of the children. Vusi Mfupi, a former Room 13 AiR for six and a half years, at Sapebuso Primary School in Orlando West, Soweto, notes that the creation of a marketplace for connectivity, collaboration and learning is the real crystalline moment of the programme.

During Mfupi's tenure, he encouraged the entrepreneurial aspect of his studio (which is a Room 13 pillar) and they would create for the sake of art, as well as sell the learners work within their immediate community. From the monies collectively made, the young learners would get more supplies for the running of the studio, as well as assist in funding afternoon meals

for the programme.

With most of the learners coming from underprivileged backgrounds, Mfupi credits Room 13 for developing creative problem-solving skills and equipping the learners with the ability to present difficult concepts visually, making them more easy to understand.



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The next generation deserves our collective efforts

Tshepang Thulo, a 3rd-year visual arts and design student at Vaal University of Technology, who attended the Room 13 studio at Amohelang Intermediate School in Botshabelo, Free State, agrees. Having been part of the programme from 2009 to 2012, he attributes 'art' as having influenced his both his life as well as a career choice.

Thulo says that through improving his skills, vocabulary and by learning that there are many ways of one achieving one's dreams if one applies themselves innovatively and creatively. He learnt that there are diverse career opportunities for artists, such as being a curator, an illustrator, a police sketch artist (forensic artist) and more. Thulo believes, had he not been introduced to art via Room 13, and his life would be remarkably different today.



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WEF notes that as jobs are transformed by the technologies of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, more than 1 billion people will need to be reskilled by 2030; and in the next two years – by 2022 – 42% of core skills required to perform existing jobs are expected to have changed. The eager matric class of 2019, who achieved an improved pass rate of 81.3%, will be short-lived this week as only a handful of the 409804 learners, can be accommodated by our institutions of higher learning.

What then of those who don't get a place? Do they have the vigour of soft skills that will propel them to take on the world with limited resources and succeed? The next generation deserves our collective efforts to lead them with a synergised plan of action, which includes art in schools, that will equip them for jobs of the future, from early on.

ABOUT NTOMBI MALAZA

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