



MAINTAINING FOCUS: Grade 12 students from Joe Slovo High School in Khayelitsha prepare for their matric exams.

PICTURE: LEON LESTRADE

Celebrating excellence on World Teachers' Day

Hats off to those who lay a solid foundation – against all the odds

TEACHERS often face many challenges in educating our nation's children. In recognition of the valuable contribution they make to the development of our country, we join the rest of world on October 5 every year to celebrate World Teachers' Day. On this day we recognise and applaud all teachers as they invest their knowledge, expertise, time and love in our children.

No wonder teaching is often described as the "Mother of all other professions". It prepares today's youth to become the responsible and productive citizens of tomorrow.

South Africa has taken significant strides towards achieving the targets for the Millennium Developmental Goal (MDG) of "Achieving Universal Primary Education". According to the SA Millennium Development Goals Country Report (2015), initiatives such as the No-Fee School Policy, the National School Nutrition Programme, increased percentage of qualified teachers, improvements in pupil-to-teacher ratios and infrastructure have contributed to achieving this goal.

As an emerging country, we perceive education as essential in its contribution to achieving MDG 2: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger. However, after 15 years of pursuing MDG, countries are now challenged to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) adopted at the UN Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro in 2012.

The aim of SDG 4 on Education is to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and to promote life-long learning opportunities for all.

While South Africa has increased access to primary education, many challenges in providing quality education and support in most schools still persist. The continued poor outcomes for Home Language and Numeracy scores highlighted in the Annual National Assessments (ANAs) are indicative of this poor quality. However, poor ANA results are mainly (but not exclusively) from the poorer schools in lower socio-economic areas and rural communities. There are brilliant exceptions to this rule, but these examples are still too few to make a significant difference. Teachers in these communities generally receive children in Grade 1 who did not attend early learning and development centres.

Research indicates early stimulation is crucial for mental and physical development, which is important for future success.

Children who enter school without the much-needed stimulation may find learning, when they enter Grade 1, more difficult than those who did have a stimulating environment like a Grade R class. While the national Department of Education considers Grade R to be the

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first year in the Foundation Phase, not all schools currently have a Grade R class that is subsidised and monitored for quality. As a result, too many children still enter Grade 1 without Grade R.

On World Teachers' Day, I want to salute and applaud teachers who, despite the odds, still manage to provide quality teaching and learning opportunities to children in the Foundation Phase. As the name implies, Foundation Phase teachers have the responsibility to lay the foundation for further learning and development.

This is the reason so many training and support initiatives and programmes are aimed at the Foundation Phase.

Examples include the numerous literacy and numeracy support efforts of the Department of Education, business and non-profit organisations, teacher assistant projects and the practice of so many learning support teachers who focus their support on pupils in the Foundation and Intermediate phases.

Grade 1 teachers are responsible in providing learning opportunities that, in addition to the requirements for progression in Grade 1, will support basic cognitive and physical development of pupils. This can be challenging to these teachers. The planning and input to provide for the child as a holistic (whole) being essentially requires not only the teaching of reading and mathematics, but also having to consider all developmental areas (cognitive, emotional, social, moral etc) while teaching.

Teachers need to be qualified to teach in the Foundation Phase and knowledgeable of the curriculum requirements at this level. They need to know what (content) to teach, taking into account the needs of all the pupils including those without Grade R behind them.

They also need to know how (process) they teach. Teachers must ensure all the pupils have access to (understand) the concepts, knowledge and skills they are taught. This can be achieved through the use of a variety of methodologies and techniques.

Many concrete activities are required that will lead pupils to slowly but surely develop abstract thinking and reasoning. Language is very important as it is the basic communication tool that allows for the development of critical skills such as expressing themselves and reasoning so necessary in later years, and further learning.

Pupils further need various and multiple ways to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding. Foundation Phase teachers need to be aware of their nurturing role at this stage because caring is essential to reach the child. Last, the learning

environment (classroom design, seating arrangements, print-rich classroom etc) need to stimulate learning.

While it is acknowledged that all teachers need to consider and adhere to good teaching principles and practices to ensure quality educational opportunities, Foundation Phase teachers are often blamed for poor foundations when children reach high school without adequate reading and writing skills.

Yet, teachers in poorer communities do not have the advantage of a school governing body that can pay for additional teachers to ensure smaller classes in Grade 1. They face challenges such as large classes of children who need additional support and multi-grade classes with, say, Grade 1 and 2 taught in the same class.

These teachers are then required to identify and support pupils who experience difficulties and implement requirements of the policy for Screening, Identification and Assessment Strategy while having to teach to achieve the standards set in the curriculum.

If teachers are expected to lay good foundations for further learning and development, they must be helped. Our greatest challenge is to acknowledge that we need a whole schooling system (a whole village) to educate a child.

We must promote practices of collaboration and peer support (school-based support teams) for teachers facing so many constraints due to factors beyond their immediate control. This is where the principal and senior management team need to lead and lay the foundation for teacher support and motivation.

They need to encourage and support foundation phase teachers in collaboration with the district based support teams, particularly the curriculum adviser, learning support adviser, psychologist and social worker.

Teachers' role in our country's development needs to be acknowledged. If South Africa wants to eradicate poverty and hunger, its citizens need to be educated and provided with opportunities to earn a decent living. This goes hand in hand with working towards achieving inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting life-long learning.

We have to start at the beginning. That means investing in early stimulation of pre-school children and establishing and subsidising Grade R as a priority and integral part of the Foundation Phase at all primary schools. Until then, support must be provided for Foundation Phase teachers who receive pupils in Grade 1 without the necessary initial stimulation.

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