



BLACKBOARD JUNGLE: It adds up that for children to progress to matric there is a need for a sharpened focus on early childhood development. PICTURE: CINDY WAXA

# Poor matric results rooted in weak Grade 1-3 foundations

A national nursery scheme could help address inequalities that are already entrenched when our children first attend 'proper' school

**T**HERE is little doubt that the failure of our education system has been one of the main constraints to the country's economic development and prosperity. The new government in 1994 inherited an intolerably unequal system, with white kids receiving world-class education while black kids obtained such a poor quality of education that only the really talented ones could escape the poverty trap. Two decades later, while the racial inequality has abated, with many more black kids at well-performing schools, the sad reality is that too many poor South Africans are stuck in schools where they learn basically nothing.

But the problem runs deeper than the sorry state of our schools. As Stellenbosch education specialist Nic Spaull pointed out recently, our poor matric results are rooted in weak foundations at school are often rooted in weak foundations at home. This highlights the need for a sharpened focus on early childhood development.

The field of early childhood development is an exciting and challenging new area of research. More and more studies show the large gains from investments in the early years of a child's life. According to Nobel Prize-winning University of Chicago professor and leading scholar on education economics, James Heckman, productivity is best shaped from birth to the age of five, when the brain develops rapidly to build the foundation of cognitive and character skills necessary for success at school and in health, career and life.

He argues that early childhood education fosters cognitive skills along with attentiveness, motivation, self-control and sociability – the character skills that turn knowledge into know-how and people into productive citizens.

Heckman investigated the Perry preschool programme in the US and calculated a return on investment of between seven and 10 percent per year through better school and career achievement, as well as reduced costs through remedial education, health and criminal justice system expenditure. My expectation is that the country's return on investment will be much higher at these

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very early levels.

But what are these early investments? They can be many things: providing mothers with toolkits containing basic necessities for newborns (an ongoing study within the Economics Department at Stellenbosch University is testing the effect of exactly this), providing young mothers with information about early childhood nutrition and health (a good example is the Ilifa Labantwana Early Childhood Development Programme in Claremont), improving the way teachers interact with kids in nurseries with limited resources, or something as simple as a television programme.

The latter, at least, is the finding of a new study by Melissa Kearney of the University of Maryland and Phillip Levine of Wellesley College in the US. They investigated whether the first cohorts of preschoolers exposed to the world-famous television and radio programme *Sesame Street* experienced improved outcomes subsequently. *Sesame Street* was introduced in 1969 to prepare preschoolers for school entry, with millions of children watching a typical episode in its early years.

Kearney and Levine found that the programme accomplished its goal of improving school readiness because preschoolers in areas with better reception when it was introduced were more likely to advance through school. This effect is particularly pronounced for boys and non-Hispanic, black children, as well as children living in economically disadvantaged areas. Their study shows the large gains from something as affordable as a TV programme for kids, not only in terms of immediate outcomes, but also later in life.

Early childhood development is one of the few expenditure categories that would win support across the political spectrum. National and provincial funding should therefore not be an issue. Trade unions that plague the transformation of the education system are less involved at the preschool level: there is thus no reason not to rapidly expand early childhood programmes across South Africa, particularly in poor areas.

I also see a lucrative private sector opportunity. What we really need, though, is an affordable model for millions of poor families unable to attend preschool.

Why can the government not institute a voucher scheme for all preschoolers to attend a nursery of their choice and let the private sector provide the services?

A national nursery scheme won't have an immediate effect on South Africa's growth or prosperity. But a new generation of kids will grow up without the inequalities in cognitive abilities that are already entrenched when they reach school.

Instead, a successful national preschool system can show voters and bureaucrats (and, hopefully, trade unions) the benefits of private sector participation, which will allow the system to be expanded to primary, and perhaps even secondary school. In my opinion this is the most effective (and affordable) way we can begin to address the massive inequalities so persistent at present.

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**WHAT WE REALLY NEED IS AN AFFORDABLE MODEL FOR MILLIONS OF POOR FAMILIES UNABLE TO AFFORD PRESCHOOL – LIKE A VOUCHER SYSTEM, WITH THE PRIVATE SECTOR PROVIDING THE SERVICE**