

Editorial

The status and the power of a foundation phase teacher

The status of foundation phase teachers and the state of foundation phase education in South Africa are a matter of concern. The foundation phase teacher is generally seen as the lowliest in the hierarchy of teachers in black schools. Becoming a foundation phase teacher is the least likely professional choice for the majority of high achieving school leavers.

In contrast, in high functioning education systems, such as in Finland and Singapore, great emphasis is placed on the early foundation of children's learning, accompanied by a firm commitment to excellent childhood teacher education and research. These examples hold important lessons for South Africa, particularly for the way in which we think about primary school educational provision. At the heart of this is the fact that foundation phase teachers are a key to improving educational outcomes for children at all levels of the educational system and that special attention should be paid to the education of the teachers in the early grades.

Considerations such as these were the drive for the EU-funded project 'Strengthening Foundation Phase Teacher Education' (SFPTE) in South Africa. The initiative began in May 2011 (Henning & Green 2011), when childhood education academics from 17 universities in South Africa and Dr Whitfield Green, from the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) met to discuss, in a first forum of its kind, the education of teachers of young children in the country. The official launch of the project followed in July 2011, during a winter school programme at the University of Johannesburg (UJ), attended by European Union (EU) representatives in South Africa and major role players in teacher education. At the launch, the first issue of the now DHET-accredited and IBSS-listed *South African Journal of Childhood Education* was presented to a representative of the Minister of Higher Education (www.uj.ac.za/sajce). The South African Research Association for Early Childhood Education (SARAECE) followed with a launch in 2014 at its first conference.

The papers in this special issue, most of which emanate from initiatives within the SFPTE programme, address a range of pressing issues in the field, from the need for research and tools for teacher education to critical curriculum revisions and more.

In the first paper Green, Adendorff and Mathebula provide an analysis of state-led interventions towards addressing the teacher supply-demand challenge in the foundation phase and present sobering figures which point to the likely shortages of foundation phase teachers in schools up to 2020.

The next four papers address the question of eligible students for foundation phase teacher education and the preparedness of such candidates for the study programme. Firstly, Mashiya argues for the value of male students in foundation phase teacher education in rural Kwazulu Natal, where so many children lack a male role model at home. Thereafter, Verbeeck interrogates key factors impacting the pathway into foundation phase teaching through the Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE). Next, Nel and Adams address the very real dilemma of underprepared first-year foundation phase students through an intervention to support academic

reading literacy. They describe a comprehensive assessment and support system for students, while Luneta investigates foundation phase students' limited knowledge of basic geometry. This author proposes revisions of the mathematics curriculum in the university programme to address the gaps originating from the students' own school education.

Thereafter, curriculum (re)design in foundation phase teacher education is the focus. Nomlomo and Desai provide a critical reflection on their institution's efforts to design a language curriculum that encompasses both the disciplinary language content and pedagogical skills required to teach young children. Zinn, Geduld, Delport and Jordaan introduce a model, co-constructed with faculty staff, students and school partners, for rethinking the integration of theory and practice in work integrated learning. Petker and Petersen report on the implementation of a service-learning model for student teachers which optimises student learning *from and through* experience.

Fritz, Ehler and Klusener write about the need for pre-service teachers to learn about remediation in mathematics education. Osman and Booth argue for a framework for teacher education that is based on a research framework – one that draws on the scholarship of learning and teaching.

The issue concludes with a model for the management of teaching schools. Authors Look and Gravett discuss the policy and legal framework of four possible models for teaching schools, and suggest that such schools for teacher education practice and research may be optimally feasible as independent schools.

In addition to curriculum development, higher education teaching materials, and development and research – the three main themes of work in the SFPTP – the field now also requires strong advocacy. We believe that there needs to be a public campaign to attract more students and further raise the status of foundation phase teachers. In a public lecture at UJ in 2012, Dr Nomalanga Mkhize, a historian from Rhodes University (www.youtube.com/watch?v=1KzISyFCZl4), explained the status of the teaching profession in South African society. In her view, teachers were traditionally revered as leaders and the profession was respected in black communities, but their status had diminished in recent years.

We believe that the nation needs to be alerted to the view that teachers of young children have a very big impact on the future learning and achievement of their young charges, and that the best young minds should be encouraged to become teachers and to learn how to lay the foundations for future learning. Good foundation phase teachers can help to keep some of the 500 000 school dropouts in school system until matric and in the country's income generating system in the future.

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(Guest Editors)

References

- Henning, E. & Green, W. 2011. Teacher rescue plan takes off. Experts get together to try to resolve the country's foundation phase crisis. *Mail and Guardian*. Retrieved from <http://mg.co.za/article/2011-05-27-teacher-rescue-plan-takes-off> (accessed 12 December 2014).