

Good results in matric start with the foundation phase

PLENTY of attention is focused on Grade 1 during the first few weeks of January each year, when children experience their first few days of school. The excitement, however, progressively subsides during the year and subsequent years, and in many cases pupils are forgotten until they sit for their matric exams in Grade 12.

Last year we had terrible matric results overall. The spotlight is once again on the educational system and what can be done to improve the low standard and assist this year's Grade 12 pupils to do better.

We have to realise that matric results are but a culmination of 13 years of formal schooling. Monitoring, support and preparedness have to start in the foundation phase, and continue right through to matric.

Foundation phase teachers are responsible for the educational foundation of children from Grade R to Grade 3, from ages five to nine. Foundation phase teachers guide the development of each child's mathematical ability, language and literacy, self-concept and self-confidence.

How and what they teach, and how they engage in the classroom profoundly influences the rest of these children's lives.

As the faculty of education at NMMU, we decided to concentrate on this key phase, and to ensure that we produce outstanding teachers from our four-year BEd foundation phase degree. In April last year we launched our flagship foundation phase building on our Missionvale campus, close to a number of primary schools in the surrounding townships of Missionvale, Zwide and New Brighton.

It was specifically built here to send a direct message to all communities that we

are committed to all children receiving a first class educational start in life.

We are currently introducing a new foundation phase curriculum philosophy and approach, based on leading educational research, notably the Reggio Emilia philosophy of child development, conceived by Italian educational psychologist Loris Malaguzzi. It draws on art, drama, languages and music to maximise the potential and many different forms of intelligences of all children.

Given that the foundation phase bridges the link between home and school, teachers need to start with something that is familiar to the child, such as the rhymes they sing at home or the games they play. Teachers need to be conscious of including rhymes and games from diverse cultures to engage children's different frames of reference.

For example, English first language South Africans will teach their children rhymes like *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star*, which are good for literacy development. Xhosa first language South Africans will teach their children games like *upuca*, which is good for the development of mathematical skills and hand-eye coordination.

We also emphasise the training of student teachers who can speak Xhosa and we upskill all students in indigenous language skills.

From the foundation phase, the next step is the intermediate phase – Grade 4 to

In my View



Muki Moeng

Grade 6 – where there is often a disconnect for pupils because the bridge between the two phases is a difficult one to negotiate. From having one teacher, suddenly pupils have several teachers and several specific subjects, and from learning in their mother tongue suddenly they have to learn in English.

At NMMU we believe in a holistic approach to pedagogy and to each child's development.

As part of this, there needs to be far more emphasis on the transition from the foun-

ation phase to the intermediate phase, and from here to the senior and FET phases.

From primary school to high school there is another significant transition in learning and teachers need to be attuned to any difficulties they see pupils experiencing. When difficulties are not addressed at every stage, by the time pupils get to matric, their teachers battle to rectify issues that have escalated over 13 years.

In our new BEd curriculum we have addressed the transition issue by introducing a senior phase programme where teachers can teach all the way from Grade 7 to 9, to be able to accompany and monitor pupils through this transition.

The Department of Education has approved this change and we hope to be able to start this next year.

To advance high school education in the Eastern Cape, over the past 10 years we



FIRST DAY: Victoria Park Grey Primary School teacher Kirsty Kotze shares in the excitement of her new Grade 1 pupils

Picture: BAZIL RAUBACH

have been focusing on attracting graduates with subject specific strengths and degrees such as a BSc or BCom or BA to do our one-year post-graduate certificate in education (PGCE), which qualifies them to teach high school pupils.

To assist Grade 12s, NMMU has a range of intervention programmes run by our different faculties and we also have intervention programmes in specific areas.

After being approached by the parents from the northern areas last year, we designed an intervention programme curriculum in partnership with schools, teachers and parents.

The programme will start this year for Grade 10, 11 and 12 pupils, and we plan to extend it to other schools in the Port Elizabeth district.

So much can be done to address the

basic education challenge in the province, phase by phase. However, central to this is for the national Department of Basic Education to commit to attracting exponential numbers of well qualified, quality teachers into the profession, remunerating teachers appropriately and elevating the profession to its rightful position as a critical, prestigious vocation.

Dr Muki Moeng is dean of education at NMMU.