

Teaching through the eyes of a child

Heather Dugmore explores a creative approach to the development of 5- to 9-year-olds in the foundation learning phase

THE COLOUR of your smile, the taste of the sky, the sound of your future...

Young children often represent words as drawings; others represent thoughts, numbers and images as colours or shapes; others express their feelings in words or in music or in silence.

These are some of the languages that young children use, and foundation phase teachers need to be attuned to them for they are the creative roots from which literacy, numeracy and life skills are nurtured.

Foundation phase teachers could not have a more important role. They are responsible for the educational foundation of children from Grade R to Grade 3, between the ages of about 5 and 9.

From mathematical ability to language and literacy to self-concept and self-confidence, the foundation phase teacher guides the development of each child.

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

On April 4, the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU) launched its new flagship foundation phase building on the university's campus in the township of Missionvale in Port Elizabeth.

It is close to a number of primary schools in the townships of Missionvale, Zwide and New Brighton.

The new building's inviting, versatile learning spaces with movable furniture can be used for lectures, music, drama and meeting rooms. They can also be utilised for after-school programmes, such as literacy development.

It was specifically built on the Missionvale campus to send a direct message to all communities that the building and new foundation phase programme are here to ensure that all children receive a first-class educational start in life.

"We strongly recognise foundation phase teaching and all teaching as an incredible

profession and a daring profession to be part of, hence our drive to encourage more students to pursue foundation phase teaching and our faculty of education's motto, Dare to Teach," says Professor Denise Zinn, the deputy vice-chancellor for teaching and learning at NMMU.

The building has been designed to accommodate 400 foundation phase students, and each lecture venue is equipped with the latest audio-visual equipment and wi-fi.

To maximise every child's potential, the curriculum for the BEd foundation phase programme at NMMU has been redesigned and re-imagined, based on leading educational research, notably the Reggio Emilia philosophy of child development, conceived by Italian educational psychologist Loris Malaguzzi, post-World War II.

Malaguzzi said that "the child has 100 languages (and a hundred, hundred more) but they steal 99. The school and the culture".

Malaguzzi felt that traditional education destroyed the child's natural abilities and he therefore developed an alternative, innovative philosophy of education that drew on art, drama, languages and music to maximise the potential and many different forms of intelligences of all children. For the past 50 years, it has been successfully practised in its namesake Italian city of Reggio Emilia and many other parts of the world.

The new curriculum has been developed to give all children, including children from disadvantaged areas, an equal opportunity educational springboard.

NMMU's executive dean of education Dr Muki Moeng explains that one of the big challenges has been to move away from archaic approaches to teaching and learning where, in a subject like foundation phase mathematics, for example, pupils are expected to memorise a range of isolated, apparently random facts. The



NEW GENERATION: Teaching children in the rural Eastern Cape's Ngqeza Junior School between the ages of 5 and 9 profoundly influences their lives.

PICTURE: SOPHIE SMITH



NEW WAY OF INSTRUCTION: A Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University foundation phase graduate, Siobhan Day, engages her Grade 2 class at Collegiate Junior School.

PICTURE: ROSS CHARNOCK

new approach is to teach it as a connected system of ideas from foundation phase level, which can then be developed through the intermediate and secondary school grades.

This approach recognises that young children have the ability to think in both an abstract and structural way from a young age. For example, instead of counting to 6 in single digits, you teach children to think of 6 as 5 + 1, and then 12 becomes two sets of 5 + 1. Thinking in connected sets where pupils can see that numbers are contained within num-

bers, lays the foundation for more abstract maths later on.

Another key aspect of the new curriculum is the inclusion of a range of indigenous knowledge systems and cultures.

"Because 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," Moeng says.

Teachers need to be conscious of including rhymes and games from diverse cul-

tures in the curriculum.

This accommodates all children's frames of reference, which is essential for inclusiveness and, in the bigger picture, works towards creating a society where diversity is celebrated and no single culture dominates the others.

"For example, English first language South Africans will teach their children rhymes like *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star*, which are good for literacy development. IsiXhosa first language South Africans will teach their children games like Upuca, which is good for



STATE-OF-THE-ART: Nelson Mandela Bay Metropolitan University launched its new flagship foundation phase building at its campus situated in the township of Missionvale, Port Elizabeth. It is close to a number of primary schools in the surrounding townships of Missionvale, Zwide and New Brighton.

the development of mathematical skills and hand-eye co-ordination."

There is also an emphasis on the training of student teachers who can speak isiXhosa and upskilling all students in indigenous language skills.

"We prepare all of our students for the real conditions that exist in schools for the majority of people in the province," explains Dr Deirdre Geduld, NMMU's head of programme for the foundation phase.

"In South Africa as a whole,

about 345 African language foundation phase teachers graduated in 2012 to meet the estimated demand for 5 505 new teachers. Four years later the need is as critical, if not more so, and we are working on considerably increasing this number through our foundation phase programme and bursary offerings, the largest of which is the Funza Lushaka Bursary."

Research has shown that it is critically important that mother tongue is the primary medium for learning in the foundation phase to maximise

every young pupil's cognitive development and uptake.

To promote this in the townships surrounding the new building, its resource centre is open to the community. Parents and carers can accompany children here to read to them in English, isiXhosa and Afrikaans, and enjoy quality time.

"The new building and curriculum are all about producing a new generation of learners and a new generation of foundation phase teachers who will graduate as critical thinkers and agents of hope, change and social justice," says Zinn.