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Early childhood development essential

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EARLY Childhood Development (ECD) should form the foundation of education.

The 2017 matric results again placed basic education in the spotlight.

Concerns have been raised about the fact that although more than one million learners enrolled in Grade 1 in 2006, only 669382 of them passed matric last year.

This leaves more than 370000 learners unaccounted for.

For me, the start of a school year is an important time to reflect on the overall state of education in South Africa, and in particular, ECD.

We need to set the goal that all children starting school are given the opportunity to finish school because as a society we have supplied children and their families with the tools for their success.

Learning starts much earlier than school-going age.

It begins at birth... we need to focus on assisting parents and caregivers to ensure that children are school-ready when they enter Grade 1.

If a child has a good foundation of numeracy and literacy, their potential to succeed is much greater.

In a country with high levels of poverty and large numbers of learners coming from disadvantaged backgrounds, early childhood education plays a significant role in getting children school-ready. Learning through play with appropriate quality resources has a profound effect on a child's subsequent formal education.

Children who receive a good educational foundation before the age of 6 are more likely to succeed in school than those who do not.

Research has shown that about 60% of children in South Africa start school with less capacity to learn than they should have and fall further and further behind.

The net effect is educational under-achievement, high rates of personal and social problems as well as poor prospects for growth, prosperity and social stability.

In 2017, the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (Pirls) showed that almost 80% of children at school in Grade 4 were below the lowest internationally recognised level of reading literacy in their language of learning (often not their mother tongue) and could not read with proper comprehension.

But the problem starts earlier – the study exposed serious problems with teaching and learning in the pre-Grade R and the Foundation Phase.

Although progress in the National Early Childhood Development sector is noted, the ECD Diagnostic Review (*Ilifa Labantwana*) pointed out significant gaps in services. The review highlighted the absence and/or poor quality of ECD services for young children and specifically that the poorest children in the greatest need have limited access to minimal services.

Waiting for the start of school is too late to start a child's education.

Investment in ECD is one of the most effective ways to decrease the inequalities in our society, not perpetuate them.

University of Chicago Economics Professor James Heckman's work confirms the great gains to be had by investing in the early development of human potential.

- Invest (invest in educational and developmental resources for disadvantaged families to provide equal access to successful early human development)

- Develop (nurture early development of cognitive and social skills in children from birth to the age of 5)

- Sustain (sustain early development with effective education through to adulthood)

- Gain (gain a more capable, productive and valuable workforce that pays dividends for generations to come).

A clear strategy is needed to develop capacity for early childhood development centres, while raising awareness of ECD through government and community advocacy and networking programmes.

This will ensure effective quality ECD programming – particularly in impoverished and marginalised communities where access to services is limited.

ECD practitioners must be provided with training programmes and educational resources such as teaching materials and toys and be there to monitor, mentor and support the centres.

It is crucial to assist ECD centres with the registration of programmes and to support parents through parenting workshops which help them teach their young children and prepare them for school showing how education starts with learning through play.

If a child is school ready there is a greater chance that from starting Grade R or Grade 1, they will be able to progress to successfully complete Grade 12 (matric).

Children who complete our programme are more likely to succeed in school, embark on tertiary education, find a job and eventually make a positive contribution in creating the foundation for a prosperous society.

- Potgieter is the chief executive of The Unlimited Child, a leading early childhood development organisation