

Where are the foundation phase teachers for our children? Black students' perceptions

M. G. Steyn*

e-mail: mg.steyn@up.ac.za or mgste@absamail.co.za

T. Harris*

e-mail: harristt@jmu.edu

C. G. Hartell*

e-mail: cycil.hartell@up.ac.za

*Department of Early Childhood Education
University of Pretoria, Groenkloof Campus
South Africa

Abstract

The purpose of this research project was to explore how Black students perceive the reasons for the low enrolment of Black students in the Foundation Phase teacher education and training programmes at universities. Focus groups and follow up small group interviews were conducted to explore the reasons why Black students choose Foundation Phase and the factors that affected their experiences while enrolled in the programme. All interviews were recorded and transcribed and initially coded independently by each researcher. The codes were reviewed afterwards by all researchers as a team from which three main themes emerged from the interviewed data: (a) personal choices, (b) community influences and (c) institutional factors. Bronfenbrenner's systems theory was used to conclude how students' choices as well as environmental and institutional factors influence the enrolment of Black students in Foundation Phase teacher education and training programmes.

INTRODUCTION

There is a serious shortage of well-trained, qualified teachers for early childhood and foundation phases. 'Many countries, including South Africa, are confronting mounting problems of teacher supply' (Arends and Phurutse 2009, 2). In South Africa, many teachers under the age of 30 tend to resign in greater numbers than older teachers due, in part, to the availability of job prospects in other sectors. The impact of the HIV/AIDS pandemic has taken a toll on the teaching population, particularly in poor communities who face increased challenges of replacing those teachers. Finally, many teachers have left to take teaching posts in other countries (De Villiers and Degazon-Johnson 2007). The attrition rate of teachers since 2002/03 has steadily increased due to contract terminations, resignations and morbidity. More than half of the 20,000 teachers surveyed by Hall and his associates tended to leave

teaching because of low job satisfaction related to a heavy workload, inadequate remuneration, and lack of professional status and respect (Hall et al. 2005 in Kruss 2008). Further compounding the problem of retaining teachers, 'learner enrolment has not kept pace with the rate of growth of the school-age population' (Hall et al. 2005 in Kruss 2008, 112).

To address the concerns of a growing learner population and a decreasing teacher population, more students must be recruited from secondary schools into teacher education. However, few secondary school learners aspire to teach and even fewer choose to teach in the Foundation Phase (Crosser 2009). At this time we have limited data to explain this phenomenon. Reviewing the reasons teachers leave the field provides some insight into why the next generation may make other career choices, but we have not systematically investigated why some students choose to pursue an education in Foundation Phase while others choose other career options.

Given the immense shortages of early childhood/foundation phase teachers, particularly in township and rural areas, it is essential to investigate the reasons for the low enrolments of Black student teachers at universities. It is evident that the majority of Black students, so urgently needed for their links with local communities, opt for other degrees or phases in teacher education (Crosser 2009). Are there contextual factors such as lack of respect for the teaching field that dissuade students from entering education? Or are there issues of access to programs in terms of location or expense? Or are there other reasons that we have not considered at this time?

This background serves as rationale for this study's focus to examine the issues related to strengthening the capacity of higher education institutions to provide more Foundation Phase teachers to meet the growing demand. In light of this, the main research question is formulated as follows: Why do so few Black students enrol in Foundation Phase teacher education and training?

Further research questions that guide this study are:

1. What are the reasons ECE/Foundation phase students choose this phase?
2. What are the reasons that Black students choose programmes other than ECE/Foundation Phase?
3. How do Black students experience and respond to the Foundation Phase programmes?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The need to recruit and retain Black teachers

The challenge of recruiting and retaining students from marginalized populations is recognized world-wide (Epstein 2005; Han and Singh 2007; Hobson-Horton and Owens 2004; Lubben, Davidowitz, Buffler, Allie and Scott 2010; McNulty and Brown 2009). Lubben et al. (2010) point to the need for increasing access to higher education for under-represented groups based on three forces. The first, economic instrumentalism, has to do with the need for supplying teachers by providing

training and education to those people who can fill the demands of the workforce. Han and Singh (2007) point out the economic utility of hiring teachers from diverse (that is non-White) backgrounds for under-served areas as well as predominantly White schools. 'Overseas-trained teachers and teachers from non-English speaking backgrounds bring a range of experiences, cultural perspectives and language to ... schools, and are important in a multicultural school context' (Han and Singh 2007, 296). McNulty and Brown (2009) note that teachers from other cultures, by virtue of their 'insider status', may be able to transcend cultural barriers and cultivate a sense of school community for learners from the same cultures. These authors go on to point out that since these teachers may share their students' learning styles, they may be more effective in supporting student success in learning (McNulty and Brown 2009).

Another force driving greater access to post-secondary education is a concern for social justice. As South Africa moved from apartheid to a democratic form of government, the rationale for improving access to higher education for Black students centered on issues of educational equity to compensate for prior educational disadvantage experienced by learners (Department of Education 1997; Lubben et al. 2010). Policies were put into place to assure greater equity in terms of enrolment to post-secondary education and financial support to assist students' financially were provided in the form of bursaries.

Finally, given the declining numbers of teachers and the increasing numbers of learners in schools, many countries have responded to the call for 'management expediency' (Lubben et al. 2010, 351) by directing their focus on increasing access to higher education through more efficient and direct approaches that include recruitment and retention strategies, incentive programmes, and alternative delivery systems. Recent changes in the current licensing paths for South African teachers allow under-qualified teachers who are already teaching in classrooms to pursue further study through distance delivery options that will lead to degrees. Also under consideration at this time are a variety of support programmes that can be delivered to remote areas to provide transitional courses that lay the foundation for future success in university level teacher education programs. Transition programmes that support students as they begin their first year of university study are also available in some programmes of study (Davidowitz and Schrieber 2008).

The state of ECD teachers in South Africa

UNESCO (2006) reported that in Sub-Saharan Africa ECCE programmes are staffed by teachers with low qualifications. They pointed to the critical issue of recruiting and training large numbers of trained personnel and recommended drawing 'more candidates to the field through flexible entry routes into higher education and teacher training' (UNESCO 2006, 3–4). The report from SAIDE (South African Institute for Distance Education) on *The State of Grade R Provision in South Africa and Recommendations for Priority Interventions* (2007) highlighted further challenges within the ECD environment that included the lack of training or the limited quality

of training available for ECE practitioners and the low salaries of pre-school teachers relative to the salaries of teachers in the schooling system at large.

Focus on highly qualified teachers as a way to address the challenges

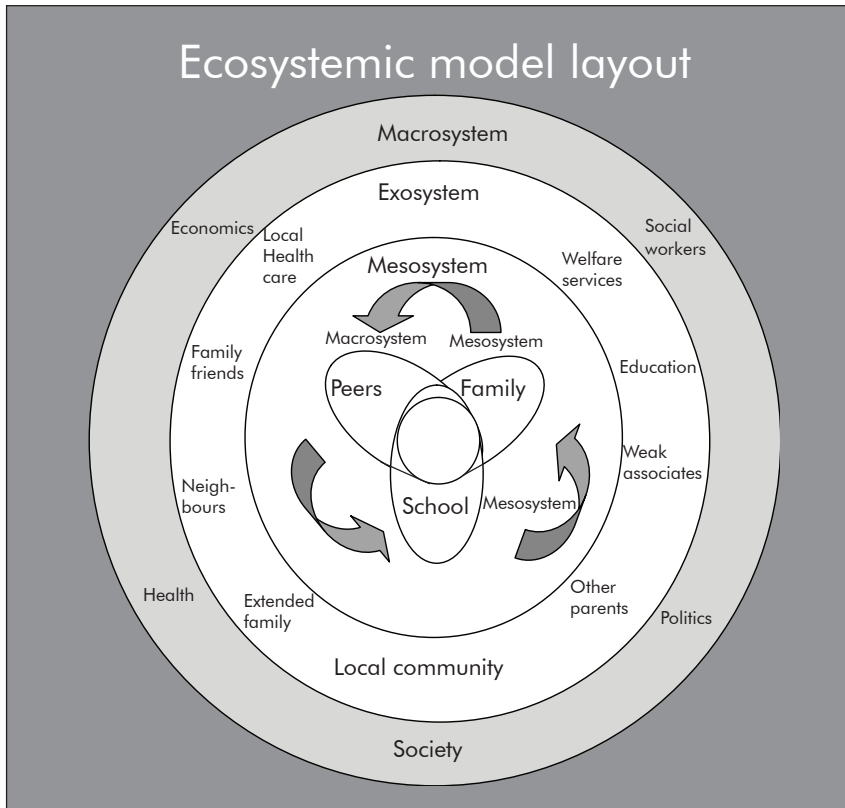
General qualities of teachers

Ackerman (2005) suggests that teacher education and training is one of the most important indicators of quality in early childhood and care, and Matsuura (2007) asserts that in primary education, quality learning depends first and foremost on the presence of enough properly trained teachers. However, research indicates that in lower-income countries such as South Africa, pre-primary staff have limited or no professional training (SAIDE 2007, 11). Teachers in Grade R, the preparation year for entering formal schooling, employed in government schools must be registered with the South African Council for Educators (SACE). This implies that they should hold at least a Level Four ECD qualification. Biersteker (2008, 41) notes that only 27 per cent of ECD sites were registered with the Department of Education suggesting that many of these teachers do not have the appropriate qualifications.

South African teacher education

To understand the context of Early Childhood teacher education and the diverse settings from which student teachers are coming, the ecosystem model is used as point of departure, to focus on factors in the immediate environment of the student (parents, teachers, and community) as a prospective teacher, the contexts from which ECE students choose to enter the profession (e.g., rural or urban primary school experiences), the university and national policies and practices related to higher education, and the mutual interactions among these factors. Against this background, the contextual framework of Bronfenbrenner (1990) is relevant (Swart and Pettipher 2005). This framework is based on the systems theory that explains bi-directional relationships among people, communities and institutions. This theory views different levels or groups in the social context as ‘systems’ where the functioning of the whole is dependent on the interactions between and among the various parts. These systems can be distinguished as the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem and the macrosystem (see Figure 1).

For the purpose of this study, the mesosystem, (which is a *set of micro-systems* associated with one another), is of importance. Within the teacher education context, factors such as dispositions to become a teacher and the interactions within the mesosystem (family beliefs and values towards education, schooling experiences, interactions with children), influences from the exosystem (e.g. family socioeconomic status, bursaries and access to higher education), and broader influences from the macrosystem (e.g. historical trends affecting access to further education, societal



(Swart and Pettipher 2005, 11)

Figure 1: The microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem and the macrosystem

values for teaching and learning) must be addressed by faculties of education who also have been influenced to become educators of the next generation of teachers across those same systems but at earlier points in time. Given the diversity in learners' contexts, the systems that currently affect children (i.e. their family systems, day care centre or pre-school and friends) all interact with one another. Bronfenbrenner has shown that the interactions that occur in face-to-face, long-term relationships (for example, teacher and learner), are the most important in shaping lasting aspects of development. Therefore, in considering the approaches that must be taken to build capacity within the Foundation Phase, it is imperative to examine the various systems as they impact recruitment and retention of teachers into early childhood settings.

In light of the ecosystemic model and the challenge to provide adequate numbers of qualified foundation phase teachers to address the low academic performance of South African children (Martin, Mullis and Kennedy 2006), an empirical study to the reasons why black students don't register for the ECE programme at the University of Pretoria, is believed to be justified and necessary.

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

The purpose of this exploratory study was to examine from the perspective of Black foundation phase students why so few Black students enrol in Foundation Phase teacher preparation at the University of Pretoria. Through focus groups and small group interviews we explored the reasons students chose this phase and the factors that affected their experiences while enrolled in the programme.

Participants

Two focus groups of students were conducted during April 2010. One focus group was comprised of 9 students; 2 male and 3 females from the FET Phase and 1 male and 3 females from the Senior Phase. The second focus group included 8 female Foundation Phase students representing years 1–3. For both focus groups, all of the Black students were invited to participate. Follow up interviews were then conducted with small groups of 2–3 Black Foundation Phase students. Three first-year students, 5 second year students, and 2 third year students participated in the interviews. All of these students were female and all volunteered to participate in the follow-up interviews although not all of these students were involved in the focus group interview.

Data Collection

Focus groups were conducted to provide background information on why Black students chose to enroll in teacher education programmes, their perspectives on their respective programmes of study, and the supports and barriers they faced within those programs of study to ‘(a) explore and discover concepts and themes about a phenomena [*sic*] about which more knowledge is needed, (b) add context and depth to the understanding of the phenomena, (c) provide an interpretation of the phenomena from the point of view of the participants in the group, and (d) observe the collective interaction of the participants’ (Solarzano, Ceja and Yosso 2000, 64). Extensive notes were taken during the focus groups and the information from these students was used to develop the interview questions that guided the subsequent interviews. Semi-structured interviews with the 7 Foundation Phase students were then conducted by one informed outsider and one member of the department in which the ECD programme is housed. All interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

The study employed a qualitative design using Grounded Theory (Charmaz 2006; Strauss and Corbin 1998). Transcripts were read and coded initially by the individual researchers, compared to the research literature and refined to identify emerging themes. The individual researchers analyzed the themes by returning to the literature and then compared their memos to identify similarities and differences in both the themes and their interpretation of the data. This study does not intend to generalise the views of these students, however, the authors raise issues from these interviews

relative to the recruitment and retention of Black students into early childhood and foundation phase for further study.

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Our study set out to discover why so few Black students enrol in Foundation Phase teacher education and training. Interviews were transcribed, read, and initially coded independently by each researcher. Then as a team, we met to review our codes and organized those codes into broader themes. Analysis of the interview data revealed three main themes: (a) personal choices, (b) community influences, and (c) institutional factors.

Personal choices

Choosing the university

Given the low numbers of Black students entering education and the even smaller numbers of students choosing early childhood and foundation phase, why do Black students come to a predominantly white institution like the University of Pretoria to study education? Responses revealed a variety of perspectives on selecting this university. For some students, University of Pretoria (UP) was 'the place to be' while others came because a lecturer visited their high school and told them about the university. For others, UP was a second choice:

I wanted to go to the University of Cape Town, but then my parents denied saying it was too far from home. So I began to look for another university and fortunately, I found this one. It's highly recommended.

I chose the University of Pretoria because it has an international reputation. My sister went here. She studied here from 2001–2004 so I already had an idea of what it would be like my first year. And I loved the campus, I loved the environment.

In looking at remarks like these, it appeared that a university considered prestigious by others may be inherently attractive to students seeking a way of life that may be quite different from the one they have lived up to this point or that their parents have known.

Choosing Foundation Phase

When asked about their decisions to study foundation phase education, some students clearly wanted to be teachers while others made changes or adaptations to earlier career plans. For example, student said:

Yes, I knew all along I wanted to teach young children and not older children ... Yes I've always wanted to teach and that's why I initially applied for education.

I've always wanted to do teaching, especially Foundation Phase. I'm very passionate about kids. You know, growing up children, I have this special place of just wanting to see children becoming adults with mature responsibilities.

For me it was a fall back plan ... I applied for Criminology, and then I was advised to put education as my fall back plan, so I did. But then the university answered me for my education application. So then, a week later they answered me for Criminology and said I didn't get space due to the fact that the humanities faculty is full. Instead of staying at home for a year, I'll just take this for a year or a single semester.

Although initial decisions about teaching may have differed among students as they entered the foundation phase programme, over time, they all became increasingly committed to their career choice:

Ever since January I've been faced with questions, challenges, "Is it really what you want to do?" and every time it's, "yes, yes, yes, it's really what I want to do". Now I'm certainly sure of it. It's not only because I'm good at it. I've rediscovered that I really love it. It's something that allows you to be creative. It allows me to be interactive; it allows me to be myself, just to put on my own perspective.

Education wasn't my first choice on my application because I wanted to try something that would challenge me, not something I knew I was going to be good at. So I wanted something different, so then, I couldn't remember what I chose, but then there wasn't enough space so I got myself in this one and I'm really glad because certainly it's something that I really want to do.

The choices that these students made were quite different from the choices made by Black students in other teacher training phases. Based on our focus group interviews with students in the Intermediate, Secondary, and Further Education and Training (FET) phases, their choices were initially to study other fields, and all but one student indicated that they were hopeful that they would be able to use their education degrees as a stepping stone into another career path.

Community influences on teaching in Foundation Phase

For the black students who are currently enrolled in Foundation Phase courses, all but one saw herself as pursuing teaching as a career choice. Their commitment to teach young children is notable, given that the profession is generally held in low esteem in their home communities. 'The status of the teaching profession is perceived as being low; teaching is perceived as downtrodden with little reward' (Sello 2010).

Well, for blacks being a teacher, it's like, I'd say not the lowest but one of the lowest occupations, careers that you could choose. It's in line with being a nurse and a police officer. You just don't make as much money. You work extra hard, you get, you work very, very hard and it's not as rewarding, as I grew up as it just didn't seem something as rewarding as teaching. It's like they hated being a teacher. Obviously they hated

teaching because it wasn't something they wanted to do. It was something they had to do for most teachers see the apartheid era as something that had an impact on that. For blacks it was a teacher, a policeman, or a nurse. Growing up, seeing that negative attitude, being forced into being a teacher, you're just not just encouraged to want to be a teacher. And then as I decided to be, chose to be, or accepted the fact that I wanted to be a teacher, I asked myself, "what if people ask you what you wanted to be, to do" like all my ex-high school mates asked you, "why, what are you going?" I'd be like, "I'm doing education". I was scared of what their reaction would be like, "Education! Are you really? Why education? It's not fun. You don't gain anything. You just work really hard," and things like that.

Particularly in early childhood settings, caregivers have virtually no training, but often open up their homes to take in children, extending the work that grandmothers have traditionally done for generations. This practice has extended to further support women who enter the workforce, but has not led to improvements in the quality of teaching in these settings. One student put it this way:

Why would you want to study to teach kids when you can actually study another degree? So they actually look down upon us. I mean in our areas, they just open a preschool, they just come in to teach school. They get the granny next door to come teach the children. So now, why would you want to go study to teach children? They don't have the knowledge of why you need to learn to teach children.

With so many negative factors working against a decision to teach young children, there were a number of supports for these women. Most notable was the support students' received from their parents for their decision to teach young children:

Well, my mother was fine but my brother was no, you should be doing law. Education doesn't pay enough money. She was fine with whatever I choose to do. It was really my choice.

My parents were very supportive of whatever career I chose as long as I stick to it and finish it.

Actually my dad encouraged me to do education because he was like always saying, "I don't have money to pay for the other careers so how about you do education." Because I remember I applied first and then a friend of mine, I came with my dad and applied for education and after they introduced the bursary to me and then I shifted to do ECD because I remember I applied for general science so yeah, my dad is very supportive and all of it.

Institutional factors

But in spite of the desire to teach young children and the support of family members to pursue a teaching career, Black students in Foundation Phase reported they faced

a number of challenges within the university and the programme. The students spoke of the cultural challenges they faced as students who came with very different preschool and primary experiences than their white counterparts. They also spoke of the language barriers they experienced, particularly the demands of reading, writing, and listening to academic English. Issues of costs in terms of money and time were also mentioned by all the students we interviewed.

One student spoke of the cultural differences she experienced when it came to her coursework:

Sometimes it's difficult because of the background that we have as Blacks. Like, the preschools we went to, and they went to, the whites, it's totally different. Like the first class, it was very confusing, like a science corner, water play, we did it in a way, but in a different way. You know, that thing made it different and that's why some of the black students quit from Foundation Phase because they couldn't get acquainted or used to the terms used or understand ...

Another student spoke of the challenges related to using English as an academic language of discourse:

But with most Black students it's the language barrier because you know when we're doing our research, the information, the English, is of a higher standard and the people have trouble with that. And you have to go through an article of 50 pages and understand all the words ... yeah academic writing, people struggle with that.

The financial costs also created challenges for the students. Although all students interviewed received bursaries to cover tuition, housing, and meals, this financial support did not extend to textbooks and costs related to the foundation phase. One first year student pointed out:

You have to know where to buy them [paints and learning resource supplies], places to laminate, places to photocopy. You look at this project for maths and then just look at the materials they used. They're beautiful. You can tell that they spent a lot. And then you wonder, how am I going to do that. How am I going to make it look much more lively so children will be interested to play with, for it to be attractive, for it to be something you know can be used for a long time?

By the time they reached their third year, some students had learned to manage the money from their bursaries in creative ways so when they were asked about the financial costs of the programme, one student responded:

It all depends on you. If they ask you to do an assignment and you go out there and buy it and buy stuff, it will be costly. If you go out there and go through the dust bins and get all the resources you need, digging up stuff, then it becomes affordable and you don't have to buy a lot of stuff, spend a lot of money.

However, when asked if the bursaries were sufficient for the costs of attending the university, the third year students responded:

You know the bursary is reasonable because we always get change. You know we always get a certain amount of money and if you pass all your modules at the end of your first year and then you have extra money for next year. But if you're carrying extra modules then your fees will go above your bursary. But I think the money is really sufficient.

When questioned further about the adequacy of the bursaries for the poorest students, one student responded:

Through the whole year? For this program? No. There's always extra money. Sometimes we spend our own. For someone who comes from that context, if you don't have money, then yeah, it will be difficult. Even if the bursaries gave you an allowance, that would be a help.

Given the challenges that students faced, students remained committed to their career decisions by focusing on the quality of the learning experiences that were provided. The match between their expectations for a high quality education and their actual experiences within the programme appeared to be a good fit:

With me I think it had definitely lived up to my expectations because we learn so much. Now we're learning about technology, we're doing maths. We're doing literacy. You feel like you're going to develop the child holistically. For my own personal development as well, my reading speed has become faster because we have to read. I feel I'm really getting my money's worth, this degree that I'm getting. If anything, I think the fourth year should be an honors – you do portfolios, practice teaching. I really feel our lecturers are really dedicated to the program. They make themselves available. They teach us until the last day of the term.

And then the teaching practice I did this year really changed me. I had to focus. I knew a lecturer was coming to observe me so I knew I had to be up to standard. So the theory that they taught me from first year up until my second year really did help me with my teaching practice and that made my teaching practice much easier than my second year teaching practice. Because there wasn't as much expected of me ... so my third year teaching practice really changed me and I think I'm going to be a great teacher.

The overwhelmingly common feature among the foundation phase students was their passion for teaching young children as their future career goal. Driving that commitment was their sense that they will bring in a new era in education. One student put it this way:

You know, as I started coming here, all the negative attitude that has been in my mind about teaching has just gone away. I'm just seeing how white people are so enthusiastic about teachers, you know, just, how can someone have so much passion?

I thought I had passion; I don't have that much passion. But then it kind of inspires you, you know? It inspires you to always try to do your best, always try and think out of the box. What is it that I can do that will have a much longer impact on my community, on people that I think should at least have a different view than what they had on teaching. I'd like to make teaching something fun, for kids to be able to say, "That's my teacher. She's fun," and for people to be able to associate teaching with fun. As something not only that's fun, but also much more rewarding – not just in terms of money but in terms of experience, knowledge, like, it changes you as a person. It allows you to develop on a daily basis. For people to view it as a chance to grow and to change, to have an impact on someone's life, to change someone, to inspire. It gives a chance for people to view it to equip, I don't know how to say it, a chance to do something. People want a chance to do an orphanage home, to see teaching as a way to help your community with.

CONCLUSIONS

Why do so few Black students pursue Foundation Phase teaching careers? The students we interviewed suggested a variety of factors affecting their decisions. Within Bronfenbrenner's microsystem the students themselves possess the interest in teaching young children and are simply continuing to follow their lifelong career aspirations. Our students noted that their parents recognized their interests and their abilities to work with children and supported their decisions to pursue a teaching career. However, for other students, the low regard for the teaching profession held by peers, community members, and particularly their former teachers influenced their decisions to pursue more lucrative careers or at least discouraged them initially from studying Foundation Phase education. The bidirectional forces of the mesosystem may serve to steer some students who may have interest and abilities related to teaching into other directions.

At the exosystem level, the change in national policies that provide Black students with access to higher education have changed in post-apartheid South Africa. Costs of tertiary education are supported, particularly for the economically disenfranchised, through bursaries that are available for tuition, room and board. However, for many Black students interested in tertiary education, the costs of transport, textbooks, and programme fees are not covered and their limited financial resources and the financial resources of their families are stretched to their limits, requiring them to find innovative ways to cope. Other challenges related to the social/emotional and academic costs in terms of cultural difference and academic language proficiency must also be addressed by the Black students. At predominantly White institutions, there are still few supports available in terms of mentoring and transition services to address the cultural barriers these students face.

However, there are encouraging signs of support that encourage students to pursue their career aspirations. The Black students in our study perceived the Foundation Phase faculty members as caring educators who were dedicated to teaching them

and available to assist them with their assignments. They saw the programme as progressive and providing a sound foundation and often commented on their new abilities to 'think outside the box' and 'use found materials in creative ways'. They were inspired by the passion of their white classmates and, most importantly, began to view their growing competence as teachers their ways to make a difference in the education of learners in their home communities.

FURTHER RESEARCH

This exploratory study highlighted the perspectives of Black students towards pursuing teaching in the Foundation Phase. These students raised a number of issues that warrant further study if we are to address the challenges of increasing the teaching workforce with qualified educators who can address the academic challenges South Africa faces. It is clear that the national education policies that have created access to higher education for Black students must go further in terms of recruitment and retention, but more research on the particular strategies that are most effective for this population must be examined. Furthermore, the link between national and university policies and the ways in which they are actually implemented also need to be researched. Potential programmes of support (e.g., transition programmes, mentoring) and active recruitment efforts that take place within the home communities and secondary schools need to be evaluated for their success in identifying potential candidates for teaching programmes.

Community factors in terms of barriers and assets that support secondary school students in their decisions to pursue teaching as a career warrant further study. With the educational performance of learners at an all-time low (PIRLS 2006), the need for qualified and effective teachers is high. Yet many community members, teachers in particular, discourage young people from pursuing careers in education, suggesting there may be factors that need to be identified and addressed if we are to improve the overall effectiveness of the educational system in this country.

Individual student factors also affect decisions to pursue foundation phase teaching. For those Black students entering predominantly white institutions, questions regarding their ability to adapt to a new institutional culture and develop competence in using both their home languages and academic English need to be examined further. Academic performance, social and emotional engagement, and teaching demonstrations are all aspects of successful participation in teacher education and may help us better understand how to support Black students once they are enrolled in the university. Further study into the relationships that teacher educators develop with their Black students and the multicultural strategies they employ are also needed as we seek to understand the ways that we prepare future classroom teachers to work in diverse settings with learners from different language and cultural groups.

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