



## Advisory Note 4

# Asking the right questions about the initial training of Foundation Phase teachers



Martin Gustafsson<sup>1</sup> (Stellenbosch University)

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## 1. Introduction

Much of what gets focussed on in South African primary schools is driven by the questions asked by Members of Parliament, statutory bodies such as the South African Human Rights Commission, academics, journalists, and of course Reading Panel 2030. Below, I list relevant questions, discuss why they are important, and outline what we know, what we do not know, and whether our knowledge has improved over time.

I focus almost exclusively on teachers trained to teach in the Foundation Phase (FP), particularly grades 1 to 3 teachers, while acknowledging that grades 4 to 7 teachers often play a vital remedial role where reading fundamentals have not been established in the early grades. Though my focus is on initial pre-service training, many of the points would also apply to in-service continuing professional development.

## 2. Are universities graduating enough Foundation Phase teachers overall?

The central teacher training policy, often referred to as 'MRTEQ'<sup>2</sup>, sets out what constitutes the minimum requirements of someone obtaining the Bachelor of Education (BEd) while specialising as a FP teacher. Though the policy makes it clear FP teachers must be able to teach Grade R learners, most of the focus in the policy is on grades 1 to 3. The evidence indicates teachers obtaining this qualification focus almost exclusively on grades 1 to 3<sup>3</sup>, given the very different status currently of Grade R in schools – for instance, the great majority of teachers who do focus on Grade R do not hold a university degree and earn on average **40%** of what someone teaching grades 1 to 3 earns<sup>4</sup>.

Transparent reporting of how many teachers with specific specialisations graduate each year is a bit lacking. A 2018 report on the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) website<sup>5</sup> points to **3,251** university students graduating as FP teachers at the end of 2016. Of these, **92%** were from **23** public universities, with the remainder from two private universities. Moreover, **8%** of the **3,251** were trained for both the FP and the grades 4 to 7 phase. The number of FP graduates, like the number of teacher graduates overall, clearly increased after 2016. At the end of 2018 **4,713** FP graduates emerged from just public universities, of whom **11%** were trained for both the FP and grades 4 to 7<sup>6</sup>. Assuming FP supply increased along the lines of overall teacher supply, there should be around **6,091** FP teachers emerging from public and private universities at the end of 2024<sup>7</sup>. What we should be asking is for publicly available annual DHET reports on teacher graduates, along the lines of their 2018 report.

<sup>2</sup> Full title is 'Revised policy on the minimum requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications' – see Government Notice 111 of 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Van der Berg *et al*, 2023: 51.

<sup>4</sup> To be precise, spending on each Grade R learner seems to be around 40% of what is seen in grades 1 to 3 (World Bank, 2022: 115). This difference is largely attributable to different salaries. The 40% should be distinguished from the 70% the policy says *should* be the level of funding in Grade R (Government Notice 26 of 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Department of Higher Education and Training, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Department of Basic Education, 2025.

<sup>7</sup> Total teacher graduates at the end of 2018 from public universities was 25,606, according to Department of Basic Education (2025: 3). DHET estimates the number to be 33,094 at the end of 2024, presumably for both public and private universities (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2024: 67). The difference is 29%.

But what is the annual *demand* for FP teachers? A 2020 DHET report indicated annual demand at the start of 2025 would be around **11,000**, up from some **8,000** in 2019<sup>8</sup>. Yet of the abovementioned **4,713** FP graduates from the end of 2018, according to a DBE analysis only some **2,677** were found in the public educator workforce at some point in the 2019 to 2022 period<sup>9</sup>. What could explain the large difference between the **8,000** and **2,677** figures, both of which refer to the publicly employed educators in public ordinary schools?

It seems pretty certain there *were* around **8,000** new FP teachers entering the public teacher workforce in 2019, and roughly the same in the years thereafter, though by 2022 the number was around **10%** lower<sup>10</sup>. Of the abovementioned **4,713** FP graduates of 2018, **3,052** were found in the public workforce if those among the **4,713** with missing language data are considered<sup>11</sup>. Still, that leaves **1,651** FP graduates who did not find work in the public system, despite the demand for some **8,000** overall. It turns out that **1,151** of the **1,651** were UNISA and North West University (NWU) graduates, graduates who were very likely to have studied mainly on a distance basis. In fact, among the **4,713**, graduates from UNISA and NWU had a **55%** probability of entering the public workforce, against **76%** for graduates *not* from these universities. Possible explanations for this are that students pursuing distance studies were already working outside the public educator workforce, and used teaching as a possible alternative, or that schools were less willing to take on graduates with a distance education background. This is speculation, however<sup>12</sup>.

What also begs an explanation is where the public system was obtaining some **5,000** joiners a year for FP teaching who were not recent graduates<sup>13</sup>. It seems around a fifth of those entering FP teaching are trained not for the FP but for some higher phase. This would create a supply of some **1,600** additional teachers – one-fifth of 8,000. That leaves **3,400** whose origins need to be explained. It seems likely that the largest factor here is what is sometimes referred to as the ‘reserve pool’. This would be qualified teachers who have not been in the public workforce ever, or not for some years, and move into it at a relatively late point, perhaps when a post at a desirable location becomes available.

So how many new FP teachers should be produced every year? The best number for 2019 would be just over **8,000**. This latter number represents demand just in the public educator workforce. That number needs to be raised by some 25% to take into account graduates who never get to enter the South African public educator workforce, possibly because they enter private employment as a teacher<sup>14</sup>. To those who might say **8,000** is too high a number, given evidence of unemployed teachers<sup>15</sup>, I would offer the following responses.

8 Department of Higher Education and Training, 2020: 60.

9 Department of Basic Education (2025: 5). See 64% of 4,173 in the source.

10 The total intake of new teachers according to the Persal payroll data was 24,362 in 2019, and 21,745 in 2022. Here ‘new’ is defined as not being in the public system in the previous three years – the methodology can be seen in for instance Department of Basic Education (2018). We can be pretty certain that around 8,000 of the 24,362 in 2019 were teachers entering the FP – see Department of Higher Education and Training (2020: 60).

11 This is from closer analysis of the data behind Department of Basic Education (2025).

12 While the figures referred to above indicate 35% of Foundation Phase graduates were not employed in the *public* workforce, even after some years, it is noteworthy that some 7,100 educators declaring themselves as unemployed in a government database come to 1.7% of all educators (Gustafsson, 2023, 40).

13 The comparison here is the 8,000 demand to the 3,052. It is correct to compare one year’s supply to one year’s demand, even if graduates from one year may enter public employment in stages.

14 Gustafsson, 2023: 42.

15 Gustafsson, 2023: 40.

Yes, budget constraints in government, which have allowed growth in teacher numbers to lag behind growth in enrolments, have made it more difficult for some teachers to find a job now, but as the retirement wave comes – it is expected to peak in 2030<sup>16</sup> – unemployed teachers will be absorbed. This will help to reduce the need for a very sudden increase in graduates as the ‘wave’ approaches, an increase universities may not be able to cope with. Moreover, let us remember that among unemployed FP teachers some **70%** appear to be from a distance education background. Addressing unemployment may in part be about looking more closely at the extent of distance education among FP teachers. Finally, in support of the **8,000** or so demand figure, it is important to realise that a pattern seems to exist whereby many graduates do not move immediately into public employment, but spend some years elsewhere, possibly as one of the around **70,000** privately paid teachers<sup>17</sup>, before possibly entering the public system. An immediate transition from graduation to public employment should not be considered norm for planning purposes.

The **8,000** or so demand figure is actually conservative. To address seriously over-sized classes in the FP many more than **8,000** new FP teachers would be needed a year to grow the FP teacher workforce. Of course, if expanding the workforce is unaffordable, then this route is not possible. However, how unaffordable is it? South African education stakeholders currently seem resigned to remaining with a total public educator workforce of around **400,000** for a long time. However, even with low economic growth, and the right lobbying by the education sector for the proportion of spending on schooling not to decline, it is not impossible to grow the workforce by **30,000** between now and 2030<sup>18</sup>. And, with the right amendments to the post provisioning policy, one could ensure that the bulk of this **30,000** went to FP. Such a route is not unrealistic, but it requires foresight now.

*To conclude, universities are not graduating enough FP teachers. Even a doubling of the current output is justified. This may seem a strange position given evidence of teacher unemployment. However, the ‘reserve stock’ of teachers needs to grow in anticipation of the retirement wave peaking in 2030.*

*Without this, universities may not cope. It is worth remembering that the great majority of unemployed FP teachers are of a special kind: they have a distance education background.*

### 3. Is the language mix of new Foundation Phase teachers right?

According to MRTEQ, every FP teacher must choose one language to be taught as the ‘home language’ to learners.

It is important to insist that the data on the home language specialisation of FP graduates are good. Every year, DHET has requested schools of education at universities to each complete an Excel file with details on graduates. It appears there are still problems capturing the required data on teacher graduates on the main university information system, HEMIS<sup>19</sup>, hence the need for this separate data collection route.

<sup>16</sup> Gustafsson, 2023: 30.

<sup>17</sup> Department of Higher Education and Training, 2020: 65.

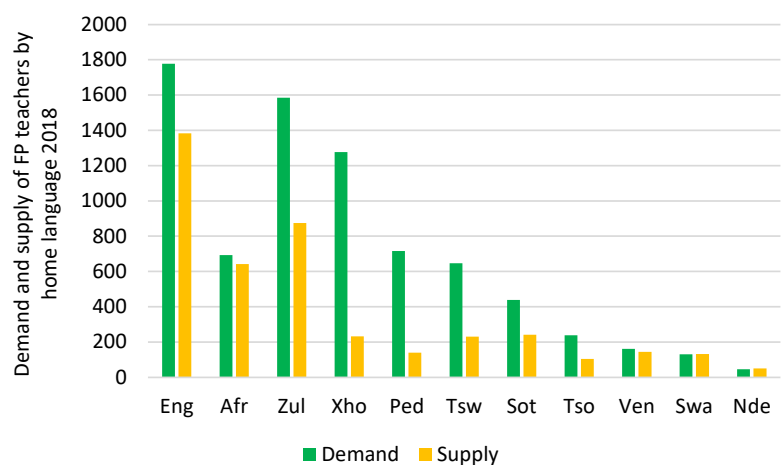
<sup>18</sup> Gustafsson, 2023: 62.

<sup>19</sup> Higher Education Management Information System.

In the past, some universities have submitted good data on home language specialisation, but others have not. A 2025 report by DBE<sup>20</sup> drawing from relatively old 2018 graduates data provides supply numbers per language, while making assumptions on the relationship between a graduate's home language specialisation in his or her studies and actual home language. A key finding is that the nine African languages are under-represented: around **52%** of graduates had this specialisation, when this figure should be around **68%**. Given the general under-supply of FP graduates discussed above, the challenge seems to be to increase graduates with an African language specialisation, as opposed to reduce graduates with an English or Afrikaans specialisation.

Among the nine African languages, the greatest shortfalls appear to be in isiXhosa, isiZulu, Sepedi and Setswana, which together accounted for **89%** of the African language under-supply in 2018. Details can be seen in Figure 1 below, which draws from the 2025 DBE report. Details in the 2025 report, and a sense of the geography of our universities, point to which universities should perhaps play an important role in improving supply with respect to African languages: Nelson Mandela University (isiXhosa); North West University (Setswana); and University of Limpopo (Sepedi).

Figure 1: Demand and supply per language



Importantly, when considering demand by home language, one should focus on what schools have identified the home language to be taught, which may not be an exact reflection of the *actual* home languages of learners. The best available comparison of these two things is provided in the DBE's 2024 sector review. Data for Grade 3 from 2023 point to one important fact, namely that while **8%** of learners have English as their home language, for **32%** of learners English is the home language taught<sup>21</sup>. There are several reasons for this, including the fact that many classrooms have a rich mix of home languages among learners, meaning teaching in English emerges as a practical option. Further factors include the language skills of FP teachers, and parent preferences.

<sup>20</sup> Department of Basic Education, 2025.

<sup>21</sup> Department of Basic Education, 2024: 67. The fact that demand for English and Afrikaans in 2018 came to 32% (see earlier 68%), while in 2023 only English came to 32% would be consistent with a change in both demographics and demand over time.

*To conclude, more graduates able to teach one of the nine African languages seem to be needed. However, it is important to firm up our understanding of the under-supply with recent and good data.*

#### **4. Is the role of distance education too large in the training of Foundation Phase teachers?**

It is easy to conclude the answer is yes, given the special communication and social skills needed by FP teachers, and given that over half of FP graduates come from a distance education background<sup>22</sup>. As seen above, these graduates are the ones least likely to obtain employment. However, discussions with lecturers from universities reveal that the situation is complex. Some student teachers studying on a distance basis appear to receive some good face-to-face support, and the right guidance during their teaching practices in schools. Many UNISA students studying to be FP teachers are already working full-time at school, and are possibly Grade R teachers wishing to become grades 1 to 3 teachers. For these students, full-time contact studies at a university would not be practical. Furthermore, contact studies are not necessarily a sign of high quality tuition. In short, the quality of training must be considered holistically.

*In summary, it is very possible that having over half of FP graduates coming from a distance education background is not optimal, given the kinds of skills FP teachers need. Yet the quality of distance education need not be bad, and for teachers already working and wanting to upgrade their qualifications distance education is the only practical option. Instead of focussing on reducing numbers in distance education, the emphasis should perhaps rather be on ensuring that the required overall increase in supply is realised mainly through the contact mode.*

#### **5. Are future Foundation Phase teachers given sufficient practical guidance on how to teach reading and writing?**

There seems to be sound advice available to *teacher trainers* in this regard. In particular, a 124-page DBE guide from 2019 titled *National framework for the teaching of reading in African languages in Foundation Phase* is noteworthy<sup>23</sup>. But crucially, the worldwide ‘reading wars’ around how to teach reading manifest themselves in South Africa too. Of note is a strong critique, published in 2019, of the DBE’s 2019 framework. That critique, signed by academics from some nine South African universities, focusses largely on insufficient consultation preceding the DBE’s framework, whether the term ‘literacy’ should replace ‘reading’, and the importance of acknowledging the history of the marginalisation of African languages. The differences do not seem irreconcilable. Perhaps the only really substantive disagreement relates to the role of reading fluency tests, but here it is possible that the controversy relates to how these tools are employed, as opposed to whether they should be employed at all.

<sup>22</sup> Department of Basic Education, 2025.

<sup>23</sup> Department of Basic Education, 2019.



The Reading Panel has been calling for an audit of FP teacher training programmes at universities, the understanding being that many of these programmes are lacking, though we do not know exactly what the problems are<sup>24</sup>. The Reading Panel's call should probably be expanded to include a call for an official framework for the teaching of reading that is more widely accepted by relevant people in the country. If important players in the training of teachers disagree on the way good teacher training has been defined, this obviously complicates any evaluation or audit.

*It is difficult to find anyone who would agree unconditionally that our FP teachers are adequately trained to teach reading to young children. But it is difficult to identify exactly where the problems currently lie, given how little publicly available information there seems to be on this matter. Further complicating matters are disagreements, probably resolvable, around what constitutes effective guidance for future FP teachers.*

## 6. How far have we come in training teachers to teach mathematics in an African language?

A problem that is insufficiently acknowledged is that when FP teacher graduates have, for instance, an endorsement on their qualification saying they are qualified to teach mathematics in isiZulu, they have very often been taught in English, not in isiZulu, how to teach mathematics. This may be because teacher training materials in isiZulu may be lacking, or because the lecturer is not conversant in isiZulu. The result is that many newly graduated FP teachers who must teach mathematics in, say, isiZulu do not really know how to take this forward in that language. This problem is said to be common across the nine African languages.

The University of Fort Hare stands out as one university with some documented experience in trying to use the African languages in more appropriate ways during teacher training – see for instance Ramadiro (2022).

*In short, much more work is needed. This is an important question from a pedagogical perspective, and in terms of the social cohesion benefits associated with a stronger emphasis on historically marginalised languages.*

## 7. Are prospective Foundation Phase teachers taught about how they will contribute to national development?

MRTEQ specifies that universities training teachers should offer to all students the 'study of education and its foundations, including but not limited to the philosophy, psychology, politics, economics, sociology and history of education'. This element of teacher training is crucial for developing one's identity as a teacher. Those who studied to become teachers during apartheid will in many cases recall how sociological texts explaining how schooling played a role in perpetuating apartheid-era inequalities helped shape them as activists. Even today, schooling plays a role in perpetuating South Africa's inequalities, and student

<sup>24</sup> 2030 Reading Panel, 2022.

teachers should be exposed to this. But they should also be exposed to the arguments of UNESCO and others explaining how teachers can in a very direct way be agents of change, by ensuring that children in historically disadvantaged communities acquire fundamental reading, writing and numeracy skills to a required standard. This should include exposure to how these standards have emerged in recent years, in particular with the advent of the Sustainable Development Goals in 2015, and the debates around measuring learning relative to these standards. How South Africa's own National Development Plan, released in 2012 and with the time horizon of 2030 reflects, and in some ways does not reflect, the education SDGs should also be a part of the 'politics, economics, sociology and history' required by MRTEQ<sup>25</sup>.

A look at a few programme outlines from schools of education at universities suggests there is little emphasis on facilitating teacher identity, and specifically on equipping future teachers to develop a critical understanding of their expected role in national development.

*The role of teachers in the national development process is something that the Reading Panel has grappled with, but there seems to be little emphasis currently on ensuring that this topic is appropriately inserted into the training of teachers.*

## **8. Is the level of prioritisation of training at the Foundation Phase level right, relative to lower and higher levels?**

Budgets are finite, but so is the amount of effort that existing institutions can devote to the large range of policy issues in education. The acquisition of reading depends on what occurs before school, in Grade R, in grades 1 to 3, and in the immediately subsequent grades. A holistic approach to education policy implies some thinking around whether there is an appropriate spread of budgets and efforts across these levels. While it is widely accepted that South Africa has under-prioritised education below the secondary level, how much to invest at each segment of the system below secondary is not that widely discussed or understood. The extent to which government and society are able to bring about change in the training of FP teachers is in part dependent on these discussions. The Reading Panel is well placed to take forward an informed debate.

Two issues seem to stand out. On the one hand, it is possible that the very strong emphasis on early childhood development (ECD) below Grade 1 emerging in South Africa and around the developing world in recent years could dilute attention away from grades 1 to 3. Clearly, what occurs below Grade 1 is important and warrants public funding. However, the argument put forward by Akkari (2022), in UNESCO's premier academic journal, that today's rich countries ensuring they had functioning primary schools before they began large-scale public funding of pre-schooling, is worth taking into account<sup>26</sup>. In 2024, the DBE formally committed itself to extending the use of 'mother tongue-based bilingual education' (MTbBE) beyond Grade 3<sup>27</sup>. While there are compelling reasons to do this, given the serious practical implications of this policy change, in particular for teacher training reform, this could divert attention from the change needed in the training of FP teachers.

25 Gustafsson and Taylor (2022) discuss the politics of early grade learning in South Africa, and provide references to relevant texts from South Africa and beyond.

26 Of particular interest to education economists is evidence emerging in recent years that the empirical evidence underpinning much of the drive for public funding of pre-schooling is not as robust as previously believed – see for instance Rea and Burton (2021).

27 Department of Basic Education, 2024b.



***Grades 1 to 3 have featured fairly prominently in education planning in recent years, and certainly more prominently than a decade ago. This is in large part due to public concerns about the acquisition of basic literacy skills among learners. If anything, the emphasis on grades 1 to 3 should be even stronger. While ECD and upper primary schooling also contribute to reading, the sector should probably guard against fatigue in relation to the grades 1 to 3 challenges. Change takes time, and shifting priorities too easily can undermine the overall task of improving reading.***

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