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New report to help tackle crisis of low maths achievement in SA

Between birth and five years is critical period, says UCT researcher

A University of Cape Town report explores the purpose and nature of mathematics learning during the early years and sets out a framework for delivery in preschools and homes.

The report, "Much More Than Counting: Supporting mathematics development between birth and five years", coincides with growing concern in South Africa about the persistently poor performance of children in mathematics. The authors are Cally Kühne of UCT; and Shelley O'Carroll, Brigid Comrie and Rebecca Hickman of Wordworks, a non-profit organisation.

Kühne, a senior education specialist at UCT's Schools Development Unit (SDU), said: "Historically, the purpose and importance of mathematics learning in the early years has not been properly understood or valued in South Africa. This is in part because there is a lack of a general understanding about how mathematical ideas and skills are developed between birth and five years."

The authors argue that part of the solution is ensuring that the right foundations for learning are laid in the period before children begin formal schooling.

"We wanted to help fill this knowledge gap by producing a report that explains early maths concepts in straightforward terms, and sets out the kinds of simple activities and methods that preschool teachers and parents can use to support learning," said Kühne.

The report stresses the importance of access to learning opportunities in the years before formal schooling.

O'Carroll said: "It's important to understand that we're not talking about formal teaching or sitting children in rows to teach them maths during these early years.

The types of activities that we describe should be a part of everyday life. Most do not require specialist resources and can be delivered as easily in homes as they can in preschools. Parents have a vital role to play, and we hope that this report will help to empower them to support the early maths learning of their children.”

“Much More Than Counting” sets out learning milestones and practical activities for the different age groups.

The report is aimed at all those involved in the early childhood development (ECD) sphere and anyone who is concerned about mathematics education. It will be a particularly useful resource for ECD practitioners, trainers and planners, as well as parents, caregivers and home visitors.

The study was funded by the DG Murray Trust (DGMT), following the successful publication last year of Wordworks’ Narrowing the Literacy Gap report, which focused on language and literacy development in the early years.

Notes to editors:

1. Much More Than Counting: Supporting mathematics development between birth and five years is available from the SDU website: www.sdu.uct.ac.za, the Wordworks website: www.wordworks.org.za or the DGMT website: www.dgmt.co.za
2. The SDU is part of the School of Education in the Faculty of Humanities at UCT. The SDU aims to raise and develop levels of performance and sustainable quality in language, mathematics, the sciences and Life Skills teaching and learning in primary and secondary schools (Grade R to 12) through policy implementation, curriculum innovation and research.
3. Wordworks is a non-profit organisation, which seeks to strengthen early language and literacy development in South Africa by transferring knowledge, skills and resources to parents, teachers, volunteers and home visitors. See www.wordworks.org.za for more information.

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