

Adopting a project-based approach to education

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Recently Sizwe Nxasana, Founder of Future Nation Schools, spoke at the South African Institute of Chartered Accountants (SAICA's) Future of Education webinar about his chain of affordable schools, and whether his innovative methods can be adopted at tertiary and post-CA(SA) qualification levels.

There's no denying that the education system in South Africa is deeply lacking. But innovators such as Sizwe Nxasana, Founder of Future Nation Schools (FNS), are out to change this.



Sizwe Nxasana

As part of SAICA's Future of Education series, Nxasana spoke about his vision of radically transforming the way our learners are taught, and how these ideas could be implemented at tertiary level.

Nxasana has made great strides in the sphere of education in South Africa, but he hasn't always worked in that field. In fact, it was only in 2015 that he left corporate life to follow his passion of moving into education. "Having observed what goes on in our schooling system, I had this idea that we need a new way of learning," he says.

Nxasana educated himself about the sector by travelling the world, with his wife and co-founder of FNS Dr Judy Dlamini, to look at different models. "We came back knowing that we needed to start a chain of schools, and that affordability would be key," he says, explaining that while rich parents have many options, it's in poorer communities that there is potential to make a profound difference.

Progressive teachers

The challenge is, how do you make quality education that's relevant, futuristic, and accessible to ordinary people? FNS have managed to do so by offering affordable and high-quality education for preschool, primary school and high school learners with a differentiated approach, enhanced National CAPS curriculum, a project-based learning model and IEB examinations in Grade 12.

The network of private schools believes in a relevant, futuristic, Africa-focused and technology-enabled education, which prepares Africa's youth for the Fourth Industrial Revolution and beyond.

For Nxasana, the key to achieving this is by radically altering the traditional approach to teaching. "At FNS, teachers need to be prepared to learn new ways of teaching, and often to unlearn their old approaches. We even like to hire teachers who have worked in fields other than education, as they bring rich experience to the classroom," explains Nxasana.

It's essential at FNS that teachers are prepared to have other teachers sit in on their classes and provide feedback, that they embrace IT in their teaching and that they are able to set high expectations for their learners. "As an example, we don't teach maths literacy, we teach core maths, as we believe every child has the ability to understand mathematics," explains Nxasana. "If our teachers believe that a learner coming from another school won't be able to keep up, they need to overcome that way of thinking and give them a fair chance to catch up and learn."

With such strict requirements, it goes without saying that the recruitment process is extremely rigorous at FNS, but what is particularly interesting is Nxasana's comment that once a teacher has joined FNS, no matter how long they have been teaching for, they start afresh. "We test teachers during the recruitment process, and if we see that they can't put their

traditional lesson plans aside and adopt new ways, it raises a red flag for us,” says Nxasana.

Because of these radical methods, all new teachers are allocated a mentor who has become a specialist in the FNS way of doing things. “They may be junior to you as an educator, but they are senior to you in our way of doing things, and for us this is really important,” explains Nxasana. “And these are all concepts that can easily be adopted at tertiary level.”

Collaborative teaching

The idea of broad knowledge areas for teachers is key at FNS, and Nxasana believes this is another very real lesson that universities can learn from his model.

“When you come to our schools, you may be a maths teacher or a language teacher, but we expect you to know other knowledge domains too, and to work with teachers across all subjects,” says Nxasana. Nxasana believes this is an area that will be difficult to transform at tertiary level, as professors are specialised in their knowledge domains and tend to work in silos. “At university level, our lecturers and professors know more and more about less and less,” he quips. “For us, it is key that our staff work interact and collaborate with teachers in other knowledge domains in multidisciplinary teaching.”

The reason behind this is largely to achieve efficiency. As learning objectives and topics cross over into various subjects, FNS tries to avoid repeating the same lessons in different classes. “Algebra isn’t only found in maths, it’s actually found in geography and accounting too,” explains Nxasana. “Therefore, instead of all three teachers sitting on their own and mapping the curriculum, we sit together at the beginning of the year for curriculum mapping to ensure the right topics are taught at the right time, and we minimise duplication and enhance curriculum articulation.”

Expanded curriculum

It’s via this type of collaborative teaching that FNS is able to achieve its goal of teaching new modern disciplines that are not part of the curriculum. “When we launched, our teachers were worried about adding in all of these ambitious new skills, as the curriculum is so packed already,” explains Nxasana.

Thanks to this approach of mapping the curriculum every year and ensuring lesson plans are incredibly efficient, FNS can incorporate essential modern skills such as leadership, entrepreneurship, coding, robotics and blockchain technology, without compromising the learning of the prescribed curriculum.

New ways of learning

With such a radical approach to teaching, FNS has had to make the difficult decision to not admit new learners after Grade 8. “We have tried it, and it doesn’t work,” says Nxasana, explaining that once children have been taught in a particular way, it becomes extremely difficult for them to adapt to the FNS way of learning. “This is because we practise multidisciplinary teaching and project-based learning, and focus on knowledge domains that aren’t necessarily taught elsewhere.”

One of the most important aspects for FNS, is that learners understand why what they are learning is important. As such, the schools organise excursions to see these skills in real-life contexts. “These are not just fun trips, we set clear learning objectives and the students are expected to write down their reflections of what they saw and why it mattered that they went there,” says Nxasana. “Unless they see these skills in action, it can be very abstract for them, so this is an important part of the process for us, and one that should be implemented at higher levels of education, too.”

Nxasana is incredibly proud of how FNS has come in such a short time. “When we do systemic tests with other schools, our kids do really well, even though they often come from disadvantaged backgrounds,” he says. “Our approach takes a lot of work, especially for teachers, who are taken out of their comfort zones, but we have proven that the results are worth it.”

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