

Optimising the Learning Environment for the Reception Year: The Experiences of Rural Grade R Teachers

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ABSTRACT The place of play in the education of young children has been the focus of much interest in the past years. Play is regarded as the leading form of development for the young children in Grade R. This article aims to explore the experiences of rural Grade R teachers when providing for play in their classrooms. The study employs qualitative design by using interviews. The participants were Grade R teachers in the Brits district in the North West Province and were identified through purposive sampling. The results showed that teachers are faced with numerous challenges when having to provide for play in their respective environments. Teachers are faced with multi-grade classrooms which makes it difficult, if not impossible, to teach learners through play. This article advocates in-service training which is based on play-oriented activities to enhance teachers' knowledge and skills in teaching Grade R despite limited space that they have.

INTRODUCTION

Grade R learners' learning through play has gained popularity over the past decades. According to Broadhead (2004), play is children's self-actualisation, a holistic exploration of who and what they are and know and of who and what they might become. Play provides children with the opportunity to explore, experience, experiment and learn. Davin and Van Staden (2012) share the same sentiments that play is the leading form of development for young children in the reception year. They add that play is not a mere pastime for the learner, but an activity which they tackle with all they have.

Every individual's right to education is entrenched in the international discourse on education opportunity and equality and in the South African Constitution (Republic of South Africa 1996b). To this end, there are global initiatives such as Education for All (EFA) and the Millennium Development Goals (United Nations 2000) which seek to expand access to education for every individual even for marginalised individuals/populations. Considerable progress has been made by the South African government to improve access to education during this decade. The South African Government has developed and implemented progressive policies and systems in a variety of focus areas to enhance the quality of education. For example, policies and

systems have been introduced and refined in areas of curriculum, school governance, Early Childhood Development (ECD), school funding norms, as well as in quality assurance and HIV/AIDS. The implementation of these policies has significantly influenced teaching, learning, assessment and administrative practices in educational institutions. However, a lot still needs to be done to address the issue of quality of education.

There seems to be growing universal recognition of the critical role that ECD plays in expanding access to education. In South Africa, the ultimate goal of ECD is to improve young children's capacity to develop and to learn (DoE 2001). The White Paper 5 (DoE 2001) mandates the inclusion of children of five to six years of age (Grade R) in the formal schooling system. Teachers are expected to use different play-based activities in a variety of learning situations to ensure that the learners are developed holistically. This requires teachers to use a variety of teaching strategies that will meet the individual needs of learners. However, teachers are faced with large numbers of learners in the classrooms and have not received training that equips them with the necessary skills they need to function effectively in a Grade R classroom.

There is substantial evidence that children demonstrate improved verbal communication, a high level of social and interaction skills, cre-

ative use of play materials, imaginative and divergent thinking skills and problem-solving capabilities through play (Broadhead 2004, 2006; Wood 2006; Wood and Attfield 2005; Morgan and Kennewell 2006; Rogers and Evans 2007; Smidt 2010; Davin and Van Staden 2012). They have indicated that play is the most powerful medium for learning in the early years, as 'formal' learning activities leave little time for young learners to develop their understanding of the world through creative and imaginative experiences. However, little has been done in South Africa to investigate and assist teachers in meeting the challenges of learning through play in the diverse context in which they have to teach.

Emanating from the above discussions, the study investigates the experience of rural primary Grade R teachers in providing for play in their classrooms

Theoretical Framework

This article is guided by the experiential learning theory which was propounded by Dewey in 1938 and is advocated by Kolb (1984). The central argument in this theory is that knowledge can be acquired through personal experience. Learning is a process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience (Kolb 1984). As the name denotes, the experiential learning theory affirms the importance of experiential activities such as giving learners opportunities to explore using a variety of learning situations. Children's learning is most effective when it arises from first-hand experiences, whether spontaneous or structured and when they are given time to play without adult interruptions. Teachers need to plan and create opportunities for learners to engage in meaningful activities. Both in-door and out-door activities need to be planned for young learners to benefit from them. This theory emphasises the need for teachers to prepare learners for the learning experience and give them a chance to reflect on their experiences which will enable them to conceptualise what they have learnt. Davin and Van Staden (2012) posit that young learners need to play freely in order to make independent discoveries and to solve problems on their own.

According to Kolb, learning is a cyclical process that involves four stages namely, experi-

encing, reflecting, thinking and acting. Kolb and Kolb (2008) state that

Immediate or concrete experiences are the basis for observations and reflections. These reflections are assimilated and distilled into abstract concepts from which new implications for action can be drawn. These implications can be tested and serve as a guide in creating new experiences.

Learners need to actively experience an activity. Learning should be meaningful to learners and relate to what they know. Learning experiences should be based on the learners' interests and relate to their own experiences. Furthermore, learners need to be given the opportunity to reflect on their own experiences. Teachers need to provide well-planned experiences based on children's spontaneous play. Teachers also need to observe and reflect on children's play. This is what Davin and Van Staden (2012) referred to as "verbalizing" children's play. For example, after every play activity learners should be given a chance to talk about their play and what they have learnt through play. This will ensure that their vocabulary and language are developed.

In order to enhance quality and meaningful play, teachers need to plan for a variety of play opportunities to ensure that learners can develop in many different areas (Davin and Van Staden 2012). Learning in Grade R aims at developing the learner in totality: that is emotional, intellectual, creative, physical, social, cognitive, religious and moral development. Therefore, teachers need to ensure that they provide for a variety of learning situations. This will allow learners to choose their own play areas and experiment in these areas. When learners are talking and moving around in the classroom it does not mean there is no discipline (Davin and Van Staden 2012).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The article followed a qualitative design using interviews. Yates (2004) points out that qualitative research is concerned with the perspectives of the participants: that is how they understand the social world and what meaning it has for those who are under study.

Sampling

The study employed a qualitative research paradigm to obtain an understanding of the challenges that Grade R teachers encounter when providing for play in their classrooms. The study employed a purposive sampling because it can inform an understanding of the research problem. The participants were chosen on the basis that they are teaching reception year learners. Four teachers participated in the study.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. Macmillan and Schumacher (2006) argue that with a qualitative study a researcher collects data in a face-to-face situation by interacting with selected persons in their settings. Data was presented as a narration with words that help in the understanding of the phenomena from the participant's perspective. Interviewing is the predominant mode of data or information collection in qualitative research (De Vos et al. 2011). An interview schedule was drawn to provide the researcher with a set of pre determined questions that would engage the participants. Semi-structured interviews were used in order to obtain a detailed picture of the participants' views on the challenges they face when implementing learning through the play approach in their classrooms. Data was analysed qualitatively using Tesch's open coding method of data analysis to identify themes and categories (Creswell 1994).

Ethical Considerations

Permission to conduct research was obtained from the relevant district office and the principals of the respective schools. All the participants signed a consent form and issues of anonymity and confidentiality were explained to them. The participants were informed about the purpose of the study and that they could withdraw from the study anytime they wish to do so. Pseudonyms were used to protect the participants' privacy.

FINDINGS

Six themes emerged during data analysis, namely, space, multi-grade classrooms, teach-

ers' attitudes towards Grade R teachers, parental involvement, management expectations and equipment/facilities.

Space

Space impacts on learning and teaching. The participants indicated that they do not have enough space to carry out different activities and to display the learners' materials in their classrooms. The following quotes capture their views:

My classroom is too small to accommodate all the learning areas that are required or even to display learners' work. (Mary)

I have a large number of learners in my classroom, so I cannot even assist learners who have problems in learning, nor can I display learners work on the wall or allow them to work in groups because I do not have space. I cannot also do other learning areas as expected of me. (Jane)

I do not have enough space in my class. The equipments that I have stay in boxes. That means if I want to use them I need to go through every staff in the box and this is wasting my time. When I do activities I must remove the materials that I was using and this waste my time. (Carol)

In addition, participants indicated that they do not have the space to display the learners' work in their classrooms. Displaying the learners' work will assist in creating a print-rich environment which is required in Grade R classrooms. The problem of unavailability of space is exacerbated by the large number of learners they have in their classrooms. This also makes it difficult for teachers to identify learners who are experiencing barriers to learning. The participants also indicated that they have resources that they can use when planning their classroom activities. Due to the unavailability of space those resources are stored in boxes and much time is spent in accessing them for teaching and learning. The teachers acknowledge that they need different learning areas in their classes but it is not possible due to limited space; this implies that learners are not exposed to different learning areas.

Multi-grade Classrooms

The participants indicated that they have more than one grade in their classrooms which makes it difficult because they cannot teach their

Grade R learners through play as is expected of them. The following quotes capture their views:

I am sharing a class with grade 1 teacher; you know it's not easy. So I do formal teaching because I do not want to disturb them. Most of the time I do subject teaching which I know is not good for Grade R learners but what can I do? We cannot move freely in the classroom as they are overcrowded. So I do not do the activities that am supposed to do. (Vicky)

I feel the classroom is not suited for Grade R because it is multi- grade. There is no space for Grade R activities. Sharing a classroom is very problematic because you do not want to do anything that might disturb the other teacher. (Mary)

My situation is a difficult one; I cannot do what is expected of me because it is difficult to teach different grades at the same time. I am teaching Grade R and Grade 1. I cannot cope. Poor learners; they do not get enough time to learn. I think I am doing injustice to the learners, but I don't know what else I can do (Carol)

The participants also indicated that they do not know how to teach different grades in the classroom. They feel that they are doing an injustice to the Grade R learners as they have to use formal teaching to cater for all the different grades. In addition, teachers reported that they have less teaching time as they have split their time between the different grades they are teaching.

Teachers' Attitudes Towards Reception Year

The development of positive attitudes among teachers, parents, and education officers will create an understanding of the value of Grade R as a reception year class that prepares learners for Grade One rather than seeing it as an inferior class.

Most teachers do not accept Grade R learners, they shout at them and call them names. They always complain about noise in my class, now it's like I do not know how to manage my class. (Vicky)

There is no enough space. Classroom is packed and learners cannot play freely. I cannot even do small group activities because of large number of learners in my classroom. There is no helper who can attend to other learners while I am busy with others. So most of the time

I do whole class activities and it is not effective. Some learners do not benefit as I could not give them individual attention. (Jane)

Some staff members undermine us, because we are Grade R teachers. They think that if you are teaching Grade R then you are not educated. They always say that we are playing we are not working (Carol)

There is no special building for Grade R learners, so staff members are complaining about the noise in my classroom. They do not want to accept that Grade R learners learn through play and when you play you cannot be silent. They feel that we are not working we are there just to play. Some staff members undermine us; nothing we say is taken seriously. I feel they do not respect me as a teacher (Mary.)

It is evident from the data that Grade R is not accepted by some of the teachers. The participants indicated that some staff members undermine them and believe that their work is inferior to what they are doing. Learners learn through play in Grade R; therefore, some staff members perceive it to be lack of classroom management when the class is noisy and the learners run around

Facilities/ Equipments

Young children get to know their world through manipulating objects. They discover things through touch, taste, smell, listening and seeing. The learners play, therefore they need equipment. The results indicate that the learners do not get the opportunity to play with their own equipment as they are shared with other learners in the school. As a result the equipment cannot be kept in a good condition due to vandalism by older learners.

Outdoor equipments are destroyed because they are used by all the learners in the school even the older ones. (Carol)

Older learners break the equipments because there is no fence around them. When we play outside, older learners are always interfering when I am busy with learners. They make my work to be very difficult. (Vickey)

Learners' equipments are not fenced; the equipments are just in front of the class. It becomes a problem as other learners also use them. I do not have control of what needs to happen with those equipments. (Jane)

There is no enough outdoor equipment. Learners are always fighting for the few that we have. (Mary)

Most participants indicated that they do have equipment for outdoor play. However, the equipment is not in a good condition as older learners are using it. They also indicated that the equipment is not fenced as a result everyone can use it.

Only one participant indicated that she does not have outdoor equipment. The unavailability of outdoor equipment denies young learners to work with their bodies and to develop their large muscles.

Lack of Parental Involvement

Parents have a significant role to play in the education of their children. The curriculum can be implemented successfully if parents play their part. The participants made the following remarks regarding parental involvement:

Some parents dump their children in the beginning of the year-even if I can call them they do not come; they wait until end of the year. (Vickey)

Parents refused to assist with cleaning of the classroom. (Jane)

Parents do not want to assist in cleaning the classrooms. It would be better if I had child minders so that she can assist in keeping the classroom clean. As it is now the classroom is not clean. (Carol)

Parents still see Grade R as a play room. Yes learners learn through play but it does not mean that Grade R should be taken for granted. Parents will not respond when you call them. (Mary)

From the above comments, it is evident that the parents do not want to be involved in their children's learning. They do not respond when they are called to discuss the learners' progress and even the problems that the learners are facing. Participants are of the view that schools and parents need to work together to ensure that the learners' ability to succeed is enhanced.

One participant indicated that the parents think that Grade R learners are there to play; therefore, no learning is taking place. This could be the reason for the non-response on the part of parents. Teachers believe that child minders could assist in ensuring that the learning environment is kept clean.

Management Expectations

The results indicate that school management inhibits learning through play. The teachers' remarks regarding this are as follows:

School management wants our learners to wear school uniform. They even expect that my learners should write class work in order to get continuous assessment marks. (Mary)

My HoD expects weekly preparations. They do not understand that preparation in Grade R is flexible; I do not have to follow the rigid time table they are using. They want us to have same break time as older learners and my learners are not comfortable with that but what can I say. (Carol)

The school principal and the HoD expect me to teach Grade R learners like they teach in other grades. They expect my teaching to be formal, have daily weekly preparation, assembly in the morning, and have breaks like the rest of the school. (Jane)

My seniors expect my learners to read and write. They always complain that I am not doing my work because my learners are always playing and making noise. (Vickey)

It is evident from the above utterances that school management requires Grade R teachers to do formal teaching despite the importance and value of play in the Grade R class. The learners in Grade R need to be developed holistically through play. The results also indicate that school management requires of Grade R teachers to follow a rigid time table and to treat Grade R the same as the other grades in the school.

DISCUSSION

Grade R is a "specialised" year and it, therefore, requires specialised conditions, for example, the learners have to sit on a mat during story telling or while doing in-door activities. The results showed that this could not be done because of the limited space in the classroom. The participants report that they are faced with a large number of learners in their classrooms. This is in line with the statements of Jacobs et al. (2011) that classrooms at all levels of schooling are often so crowded that only one kind of grouping is possible. A large number of learners in the classroom allows little time for group activities and makes it difficult for teachers to identify learners with barriers to learning. Davin

and Van Staden (2012) contend that learners require enough well planned space in order to learn through play. Limited space prohibits the learners' total development as they are not exposed to a variety of learning situations. Hoadley and Jansen (2010) argue that the physical space available for teaching and learning influences the way in which we teach and the way in which we implement the curriculum. However, it is the responsibility of the teacher to create a classroom environment that is conducive to learning and teaching and can stimulate the learners' curiosity and thinking (Conley et al. 2010). They add that the careful use of physical space could make a considerable difference to classroom behaviour.

Jacobs et al. (2011) contend that no classroom seating arrangement will suit all the activities perfectly; therefore teachers have to arrange their classrooms according to the activities that they prescribed for a particular lesson. Even small classrooms can offer learners exciting play opportunities if the teacher is willing to plan creatively and work hard to make the most of the available space (Davin and Van Staden 2012). Teachers need to plan carefully in order to accommodate different learning areas even in a limited space.

The time available for teaching is an important teaching resource (Hoadley and Jansen 2010). It is evident from the above results that teachers are overloaded; they have a large number of learners in their classes. In addition, these learners are from different grades. According to Jacobs et al. (2011), teachers are unable to focus on their core teaching and learning tasks when they are overloaded.

The results showed that the teachers are faced with multi-grade classrooms. Berry (2010) defines multi-grade teaching as teaching which occurs within a graded system of education when a single class contains two or more student grade levels. According to Berry (2010), teachers need to be taught how to plan across grade levels objectives or how to adjust the curriculum to make it suitable for their setting.

The teachers' choices in implementing the curriculum may depend on the resources that they have. Hoadley and Jansen (2010) and Jacobs et al. (2011) argue that no classroom seating arrangement will perfectly suit all activities. They add that a classroom needs to be arranged according to the activities that teachers

have prescribed for a particular lesson. This suggests that even though the classroom can be small due to a large number of learners in the class, it should not be used as an excuse for not having different learning areas in the class. The teacher needs to alternate the learning areas to ensure that the learners experience different learning areas. According to Hoadley and Jansen (2010), resources influence the quality of teaching and learning and the degree to which a curriculum can be implemented. It is also evident from the results that Grade R learners share their resources with learners in other grades and even the community members. This contradicts the DoE (2011) statement that Grade R learners should as far as possible not interact with learners from other grades.

In addition, a lack of parental support is the main challenge for Grade R teachers. Supporting parents can help learners learn and influence their developmental progress. When a special relationship is developed between parents and teachers, good developmental outcomes may be achieved (Blatchford et al. 2002). Furthermore, school management requires of Grade R teachers to teach formally in this class.

The teachers indicated that the heads of departments in school expect of them to follow a rigid time table and lesson planning similar to that of learners in other grades. This is in contradiction with what Davin and Van Staden (2012) who mentioned that children in the Grade R class have to play in order to learn and that flexibility should be allowed. The DoE (2011) further emphasised that the planning of activities should be different from the other grades. Planning should be flexible and should not follow a rigid time table as in other grades. Therefore, a rigid time table is not a solution if the intention is to develop the learner holistically.

CONCLUSION

Grade R plays a very important role in the development of young learners. Therefore, those who are involved in this class need to be given the necessary support to perform their duties with diligence. The study showed that Grade R teachers do not get support from the school management, other teachers and the parents. It should be mentioned that if there is no support for the teachers, the learners will also bear the

consequences as the teachers will not give them the attention they deserve. Grade R teachers are facing numerous challenges when they provide for play in their classrooms. The challenges include, lack of enough space, equipment for play and multi-grade teaching.

The parents can be involved in their children's learning by supervising their home work and also to sign their homework as an indication that they have seen the children's work. If the learners see that their parents take interest in their work it would encourage them to learn. Grade R teaching will remain a challenge if Grade R learners do not benefit through their learning experiences. In addition, the development of positive attitudes among teachers and parents will create an understanding of the value of Grade R as a phase that is critical for the learners' development and it should not be seen as an inferior class.

RECOMMENDATIONS

School management plays an important role in ensuring the smooth running of the school. It is important that Grade R teachers receive support from the school management. This will also assist in changing the other teachers' attitudes towards Grade R teachers and treat them with the respect they deserve. School management, parents and other teachers in primary school need to be given information regarding what happens in a Grade R class and how these learners differ from other grades. This can be done through information sharing sessions during meetings or workshops. This will ensure that they receive the necessary information regarding the value of play in the Grade R class.

Teachers need to be trained to use the limited space they have to create an environment for young learners to develop holistically as there is no classroom arrangement that could suit all activities. In addition, teacher creativity needs to be enhanced through continuous development workshops which are based on play-oriented activities to enhance teachers' knowledge and skills in teaching Grade R even in the limited space that they have.

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