

Pre-school Experiences and Formal School Readiness of Six-Year-Olds: The Stakeholders' Views

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ABSTRACT The importance of pre-school in getting children ready for formal learning cannot be underrated as fifty percent of brain development takes place at this stage. Besides offering affordable day-care, health service and poverty alleviation, pre-school prepares children for formal learning. A qualitative research approach, which views human behaviour as a product of people's interpretation of their world was adopted. Data collected through one focus group discussion with stakeholders; semi-structured interviews with four pre-school educators and four Grade One educators were thematically analysed to reveal the views of stakeholders on formal school readiness for pre-school graduates. Findings suggest that children are not adequately prepared for formal schooling. Results equally show that high quality pre-school service with higher staff qualification correlates with better intellectual and psychosocial development; yet very few centres had qualified educators. The study recommends intensive teacher training, attractive salary structure and equity in provisioning for pre-school classes timeously.

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education is critical in laying a firm foundation for personality and academic development of our young generation. Besides being a crucial influence on cognitive stimulus, socialization, and child growth, early education is an indispensable service for working parents. Employed parents value facilities that can offer care for their children before and after school while they are still occupied. The Bill of Rights declares education as a fundamental right of every child, a right that many countries including South Africa have violated especially on pre-primary learning. Early childhood education had been a privilege for the elite and urbanised communities where privately-owned pre-schools and nursery centres mushroomed, leaving early education for the poor and the rural community to fate. The renewed interest in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) was a response to the Jomtien Declaration and the Dakar Framework of 1990, Conventions, World summits and the adoption of Millennium Development Goals (Vargas-Baron and Schipper 2012). More so, the active participation of women in the corporate labour market has also created a high demand for the ECCE services

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where mothers can leave their babies while they are at work.

In South Africa ECCE is referred to as Early Childhood Development (ECD) and is defined as the progression by which children grow and thrive physically, mentally, emotionally, morally and socially from birth to nine years (Penn 2008). It is a deliberate attempt by an individual or groups of people to influence developmental transformation in children leading to their age of school entry (Gordon and Browne 2004; Yzel 2017). Within the concept of early childhood, education terms such as crèche, daycare, nursery, kindergarten, pre-school, Grade R and Grade Zero have been used synonymously referring to the type of learning and care to which children are exposed before formal primary education. In South Africa, pre-school was introduced as the Reception year/Grade R which is in the Foundation Phase in all primary schools making the Department of Education (DoE) responsible for it. Although not compulsory, the idea was to redress the segregation caused during the apartheid era and to extend the service to many children from different backgrounds (Biersteker 2010).

There have been numerous dialogues about learners in the Foundation Phase because they cannot read and understand the text in that level. The Department of Education (DoE 2002) has viewed the status of reading competency of

South African learners from Foundation Phase to Grade 12 as a cause for concern suggesting a crisis in the level of reading competence (Mudzzielwana 2014). In a study carried out in 2002 in the nine provinces of South Africa, the DoE found that only about thirty-eight percent of Grade Three learners could read. Corroborating these findings, the Southern African Consortium for Monitoring Standards (SACMEQ 2016) disclosed that the reading ability of grades one to six learners was two grade levels below their own level both in their Mathematics and English. In the Eastern Cape, the analysis of pupils indicated that whilst they already are 1.8 years behind by the Grade Three point of reference, this propagates to 2.8 years behind by the time they reach Grade Nine, creating higher grade effectual remediation impracticable.

Due to the influence of global knowledge, technology and skills; the desire to eradicate the apartheid regime injustices in education and the aspiration to improve performance of learners, South Africa has embarked on reshaping its curriculum by making frequent changes to match up to the international standards of education. The national Department of Education (DoE) initiated the National Curriculum Statement for Grades R-9 and for Grades 10-12 as the modified version of Curriculum 2005 to the Foundation Phase educators despite the deficiency of in-depth training and the vagueness of the architects and trainers themselves (Burger 2009). In 2009, owing to implementation challenges another curriculum review compiled into a distinct document branded as the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) Grades R-12 was presented in 2011 (Department of Basic Education 2011) updating its aims to offer clear specification of the substance to be taught and learnt termly. This document exemplifies the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) for instruction and learning in the South African schools. These curriculum changes comprising the aims and objectives, curriculum content and its design that focused on improving the quality of education (Erden 2010).

Profuse evidence emerging from studies and reports from Spaul (2013) and Mudzielwana (2014) indicate that despite its vast resources, continuous curriculum reviews, reading standards of South African learners are still below the accepted standards. Notwithstanding these exertions, poor performance of learners in the

Foundation Phase continues to be a grave social concern. For example, when compared with forty countries in the 2006, Progress in the International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) indicate that South Africa had the lowest reading literacy levels (Fleisch 2007; Mullis et al. 2007). Confirming this situation were systemic assessment results of 2001, 2007 and 2011 displaying poor Grade three performances. Reddy et al. (2012) reported a whopping seventy percent underperformance. Furthermore, Modisaotile (2012) conveyed that Grades three and six learners' performance in literacy and numeracy was poor across the country having a national average of only thirty-five percent according to the 2011 Annual National Assessment (ANA) concluding that the primary school education in South African is still in crisis (Sosibo and Nomlomo 2014). The information above clearly displays the persistence of performance challenges within the education sector.

It becomes crucial that the learning insufficiencies acquired early in children's education (that is, in the Foundation Phase), be identified and remediation offered to address these learning deficits before they become insuperable learning gaps causing certain failure and leading drop-out (Spaul 2013). Poor performance of learners in the Foundation Phase is an indication that there is a need for exploring the stakeholders' views on pre-school experiences and formal school readiness of six-year-olds so as to use the research-based strategies from the stakeholders' discernments to create unity in designing improvement stratagems.

The Context of Early Childhood Education in South Africa

In South Africa ECD is a term embracing all the services that endorse or uphold improvement of young children from birth to nine years old (Department of Basic Education (DBE) 2013) in which ECCE is regarded as a very important facet of ECD. It is a period that entails education for children in the chronological age range of zero to nine. Educationists are concerned with having children ready for school, hence attracting the interest of researchers to look into the role of pre-school programs in terms of school readiness (Lally 2010).

Early Childhood Early Care is meant to develop a group of young children academically

as well as offers services comprising birth registration, affordable daycare, health service in centres that have adequate infrastructure and facilities such as water and sanitation (Tabane and Human-Vogel 2010; Richter 2012; Sotuku et al. 2016). In order to alleviate poverty, the South African government disburses child support grant to approximately sixty percent of children (babies and toddlers), mostly Black Africans; indicating a high level of poverty within the country (Albino and Berry 2013; World Bank 2013); thus, embracing ECCE is seen as a strategy that would recompense the disadvantages initiated during the apartheid period (Meier et al. 2015). The capability of ECCE programs in predicting the future trends in shaping the society in terms of human capital development and redressing the apartheid era injustices places it at the heart of any national programs. Research indicates that investing in ECCE is certainly cost-effective since a solid foundation assures the general public of good academic achievement and well-being of children in the next generation (Grantham-McGregor et al. 2007; Gertler et al. 2014).

Extensive research carried out has shown that pre-school experiences have positive impact on the social and cognitive aspects of the children's growth (Heckman and Masterov 2007; Alexander 2010; Barnett 2012; OECD 2011). Psychology has proved that early childhood experiences leave a lifelong impression on the structural design of a child's brain (Duncan et al. 2007; Lonigan and Shanahan 2010). Furthermore, undesirable circumstances and bad experiences early in the child's life can permanently influence every aspect of an individual's life; consequently, they fail to develop socially and economically to become human capital of a nation (Sherr et al. 2009). Nonetheless, using ECCE to predict the future tendencies helps to determine the social order of the country in terms of its human capital growth and rectifying injustices caused by apartheid colonisation.

The National Integrated ECD Policy and the Education of Children

As a signatory to the United Nation's (UN) Convention on the Rights of the child (CRC), the Government of the Republic of South Africa (GRSA) upholds the stance that ECD is a universal right and that every child has the right to

programs that physically, socially, cognitively and emotionally develop them (UN General Assembly 2010; Martin et al. 2014). Through the National Integrated ECD Policy (NIECDP) (2015), the GRSA endorses the regional and international commitments on the Rights of the child. Significantly, the NIECDP (2015) recognises ECD as a public good hence it assures the safety, healthy environment while children develop to their full potential well-being.

Parents are recognised as primary caregivers whose responsibility is to ensure all-round development and well-being of the child while government offers support in terms of counselling and nurturing parent/caregiver-child relationship (NIECDP 2015). In addition to the commitment towards the Right of the child is the social assistance of cash transfer through the Care Dependency Grant (CDG), the Child Support Grant (CSG), and the Foster Care Grant (FCG). These grants are meant to alleviate poverty and suffering for vulnerable children and potentially reduces the multifaceted challenges facing South Africa (Engle et al. 2011; Walker et al. 2011; Britto et al. 2013).

Notably are the gaps in implementing the policy laden with system paucities whereby some children are still exposed to a manifold risk factors and the right to ECD is still unrealised (Statistics South Africa 2004, 2012; Dawes and Biersteker 2010; UNICEF 2011; Richter 2012). Although the NIECDP (2015: 20) categorically affirms government's responsibility in appropriate administrative, legislature and other measures obligatory to realize the ECD rights of children, it is silent on how to make the ECD programme compulsory to every child, how to deal with parents who for any reason do not send their children to ECD centres and how to ensure ECD programs are available in every corner of the country. Furthermore, it is inaudible in set standards criteria for a pre-school to be viable in delivering quality ECD programs that will lay a firm foundation for formal school learning for all children.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the social cognitive learning theory developed by Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934). Vygotsky (1978) assumed that social interaction intensely influences cognitive development and that cognitive learning does not

occur in isolation (Aronstam 2005). The theory is appropriate for this study because it focuses on associations between people and the cultural context in which they operate and interact in shared experiences influencing child development (Crawford 1996). It is also Vygotsky's (1978) belief that learning and development of the child depends on his/her maturity and the support systems provided by the environment. Of particular interest in this study is the zone of proximal development (ZPD) which is defined as the area of investigation for which the child is equipped cognitively through close assistance and social interaction to maximally develop (Conway and Briner 2005). Psychologists assert that most of the development and learning takes place during pre-school years (Lonigan and Shanahan 2010; Oberklaid et al. 2012), confirming Vygotsky's assertion that within the ZPD children's development sprouts of conceptual or skill development can be distinguished as a prologue to guiding the child from a budding to a more matured form of understanding. Cognitive growth, with higher-order learning, is entrenched in social interactions and facilitated by abstract symbols known as tools.

Scaffolding is another concept whereby the teacher builds up children's learning by increasing the level of assistance as they grasp what has been taught before (Vygotsky 1978). Strategies such as scaffolding, collaborative learning and modelling are ideal for supporting academic achievement; skills development and they facilitate premeditated learning. Through the ZPD and scaffolding the teachers are able to recognize the capabilities of the child and then provide the necessary framework to help the child develop the skill individually. Pre-school is characterised with scaffolding where much learning is done collaboratively making way for this learning to be independently accomplished as children grow older. Teachers then have to provide an environment that motivates imaginative play for younger children while unknowingly develop their language and intellectual skills. Interaction with others accelerates learning hence it is essential that pre-school prepares children for formal school.

Pre-school Education and Children's Psychosocial Development

Recently the need for well organised pre-school programs has intensified policy initiatives in many countries (Clough and Nutbrown

2004; Powell 2010). Research indicates that attending pre-school benefits all children and the effects of their experiences academically and their social-behavioural outcomes continue to be seen till the child turns eleven (Sammons et al. 2003; Siraj-Blatchford et al. 2003; Sylva et al. 2007; Melhuish 2010). At the end of pre-school or Grade R children are assessed to ensure they have achieved certain standards that will make them cope with formal education.

The major goal of the Grade R programme is to make sure that children are physically, cognitively, linguistically, socially, emotionally and socio-culturally prepared for the start of an enduring school career (Grantham-McGregor et al. 2007). It is further assumed that pre-school learning provides children with varied experiences (Karoly et al. 2008) to make them geared up for formal intensified learning. In pre-school children develop the ability to associate well with peers at the same time showing maturity cognitively, socially and emotionally (Nelson et al. 2003; Karoly et al. 2008) confirming Vygotsky's theory which states that children develop tremendously through association.

Importance of Pre-school Education on the Child

A considerable amount of worldwide research found that pre-school instruction improves the learning and growth of young children (Barnett 2008; Camilli et al. 2010; Phillips and Meloy 2012). While it is considered to be a strategy for making children ready for school it also helps children access the needed health care; safety and security from abuse, neglect and exploitation; and enhanced food and nutrition NIECDP (2015). Furthermore, Barnett (2008) attests that through pre-school learning social ills such as delinquency and crime are reduced in adolescence and adult life. Extensive research confirms the notion put forward by psychologists that learning is accelerated during children's early years hence the need to support learning and development of children in ECD (National Early Literacy Panel 2008; Neuman and Dickinson 2011; Lonigan and Shanahan 2010).

According to Thompson (2002) children learn to work together, follow simple instructions, exhibit self-control, and are attentive in early learning. Socio-emotional skills are developed as they are significant to the success of formal school learning (Edwards et al. 2008). Pre-school

is where children from affluent families and those from poverty-stricken backgrounds are offered the same pedagogical skills. Davin and Van Staden (2005) emphasize that readiness for formal school develops when children are exposed to suitable stimulation and have equal chances to play and learn cognitive skills that make them ready for school. Children learn through playing with toys and games that compel them to discover their environment (Heckman et al. 2010). Based on research, pre-school programs can exploit the accelerated learning that happens in children's early years (Gorey 2001; Nelson et al. 2003; Barnett et al. 2007; Gormley et al. 2008).

When children are separated from their primary caregiver for the first time, they feel lost, stressed and may cry a lot. As they continue attending pre-school they make friends and have the chance to play with toys that are not available in their homes. Children acquire communication and life skills, social, cognitive skills, socio-psychological development and emotional constancy through interaction with peers from diverse backgrounds (Karoly et al. 2008; McCartney et al. 2007; Sheridan et al. 2013). In their opinion, NICHD Early Child Care Research Network and Duncan (2003) and Barnett (2008) assert that pre-school enables children who come from disadvantaged backgrounds to surmount their desolations, introversion, inferiority complex and a sense of deficiency or being disregarded. At pre-school, children tend to be immersed in play such that despondencies are temporarily forgotten; therefore, learning through play occurs. However, it is equally important to know what readiness is so that any teacher can assess children.

The Meaning of School Readiness

School readiness is a commonly used phrase referring to a collection of behaviours and competence that children have attained in time for formal school (Ziv 2013; Welsh 2014), which ensures that they are well adjusted for learning experience. It designates the proficiencies of children, within their families, in schools, and in the communities, that will best stimulate successful learning in school and beyond (Maxwell and Clifford 2004). It is the progression of early development and learning, from initial stages to formal schooling age, when the children learn the attitudes and skills they require to thrive in

school. School readiness is described in numerous ways by early childhood experts, but characteristically talking about readiness in areas such as: approach to learning; cognition and knowledge acquisition; health and physical growth; language development, communication, social and emotional development (Bowman and Moore 2006). School readiness is the groundwork of equity and quality education which is attracting global interest as a worthwhile way of helping young children achieve their full potential and engage in enduring learning (UNICEF 2011). School readiness is related to better-quality academic outcomes in elementary and high school leading to behavioural proficiencies in adulthood. In the other school of thought, school readiness may be used to pronounce the ability of a school in providing good education to children (Raver et al. 2008). It also brings up the readiness of families for the changeover to formal school. School readiness is therefore considered a communal responsibility for schools, curriculum, and families.

Challenges Facing Pre-school Learning in South Africa

In adherence to the Rights of the Child the Department of Basic Education (DBE) expanded the universal access to early learning by providing pre-school for 3-5 year-olds in primary schools (Vargras-Baron 2013). Although this noble idea opened access to education for many children, schools faced challenges in offering this service. The first challenge encountered was the shortage of qualified teachers to teach Grade R (Pandor 2005). Teachers for 5-6 year-olds need to be qualified with the expertise to lay a firm foundation for children's academic excellence in education. To alleviate the manpower problem, pre-school teacher training was included in the Bachelor in Education (Foundation Phase) degree programme. Those who specialise in ECD are meant to teach Grade R. However, in reality the graduates from this programme opt for Grade 1-3 posts due to monetary and promotional insinuations (Atmore et al. 2012). Appointment of Grade R teachers has been the responsibility of School Governing bodies that tend to pay less, have no medical or pension schemes hence qualified teachers shun from these classes (Atmore et al. 2012). The other challenge South African pre-schools face is the issue of multi-languages

and the diverse socio-cultural background of children (Viljoen and Molefe 2001). The teacher is often unable to handle the diverse languages in classroom. The migration of children into schools previously reserved for Whites and Indians only created challenges to educators who could not cope with the diverse linguistics found in the classrooms (Pluddemann et al. 2000). Furthermore, the expectation is that teachers should be knowledgeable in learning theories, the curriculum, pedagogy and appraisal, yet many schools fail to attract qualified personnel for the pre-school due to financing and promotion challenges already alluded to.

Poverty, discrimination and isolation have posed to be a big challenge for the achievement of the Rights of the Child as detailed in the South African Constitution (Du Plessis and Conley 2007; UNICEF 2011). Some children live below the poverty datum line alone or with unemployed adults (The General Household Survey 2009; Stats SA 2010). Although South Africa has the political will through adherence to the Bill of Rights and is committed to financing ECD programs (NIECDP 2015), lack of access to the programs by the poorest children is still a major concern (Dawes 2008). Concurring to this notion, Atmore et al. (2012) view the achievement of good quality life for the most of South Africa's children as a far-off dream. Related to the issue of poverty are the effects of HIV-AIDS and child-headed households where children are faced with vulnerability to discrimination, abuse and isolation. Although funding children through the Care Dependency Grant (CDG), the Foster Care Grant (FCG) and the Child Support Grant (CSG), has increased (from R335 Million in 2003/2004 to One billion Rands in 2011/2012), there are inconsistencies through provinces in terms of beneficiaries accessing the financial support (Giese et al. 2011; Ogunyemi and Ragpot 2016).

Another challenge facing pre-school in South Africa is the scarcity of teaching and learning resources, furniture in the classrooms, insignificant financing provided for pre-school in general. Children are exposed to security and health risks as the toilet facilities are in poor condition (DBE et al. 2010; Atmore et al. 2012). Seleti (2009) believed that access to economic benefits was not equal among ECD centres hence the need to track and monitor the financial disbursement to all centres is paramount.

Improvement of Children's Participation in Pre-schools

Participation refers to the process of distribution in decisions that have emotional impact on one's life. Every citizen has a fundamental right to participation (Hart and Risley 1995). Participation by children is a naive perception for children who basically have no decision-making power that adults have. Although they may not be able to express their views, young children have the right to participation which empowers them against discrimination and subjugation. Articles 12 and 13 emphasize beyond the Right of the child to legal participation in the society but goes on to entrust the whole family to take up responsibility of the child (UNICEF 2011). The family is not the sole agent in the socialisation of the child but there is need for the child to participate in early learning which is outside the family boundaries.

South African government extended access to early education through the introduction of Grade R or reception year before formal schooling (White Paper 5 2001). In their opinion, van der Berg et al. (2013) assert that there was a three-fold increase in the enrolment of Grade R between 2001 and 2012 in the public schools from 242 000 to 768 000, meaning that more than ninety percent are in public schools. This move compelled the government to increase subsidy to ECD centre through the DSD and to Grade R through the DoE causing augmented enrolment within a total 5531 registered ECD catering for 314912 children (DBE et al. 2010). The main determination was to protect children's rights at the same time developing them emotionally, socially and physically to their maximum potential. However, the efforts do not shed light on how pre-school prepares children for formal schooling which is the emphasis of this paper.

Main Research Question

- ◆ How do stakeholders view pre-school in terms of formal school readiness?

Sub-research Questions

- ◆ What is the present status of pre-school in preparing children for formal school?
- ◆ What challenges do pre-schools face in preparing children for formal school?

- ◆ How can pre-school be improved to enhance formal school readiness?

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are:

- ◆ To assess the stakeholders' views on pre-school in terms of formal
- ◆ To evaluate the present status of pre-school in preparing children for formal school
- ◆ To find out the challenges pre-schools face in preparing children for formal school
- ◆ To find ways of improving pre-school to enhance formal school readiness

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted qualitative research approach which views human behaviour as a product of people's interpretation of their world (Babbie and Mouton 2007). It is defined as an enquiry procedure of understanding where a researcher develops a multifaceted, total picture, analyses statements, reports detailing the views of respondents, and conduct the research in a natural setting (Creswell 2016) in order to discover and understand a central phenomenon under study. The researcher used the semi-structured interviews to pursue the responses of the respondents seeking clarity to some incomprehensible points by asking for elaboration or redefinition of responses that appeared incomplete or ambiguous. Participants comprising three Grade R educators, three Grade One educators, three mothers and three fathers were purposively sampled. Semi-structured interviews allowed respondents to express themselves at some length on topics allowing the use of various probes to the satisfaction and coverage of the research objectives (Bernard and Ryan 2010). Through the semi-structured interviews the stakeholders expressed their opinions on the importance of pre-school, the status quo of the pre-schools, the challenges faced in pre-schools thereby giving suggestions of improving service delivery in pre-schools.

Credibility and Trustworthiness of Instruments

Consequently, interview schedules were subjected to pilot testing so as to ascertain the reliability and validity of instruments before they could be used to extract information from the

participants (Dikko 2016). The use of a tape recorder enhanced credibility and reliability of the study (McMillan and Schumacher 2001). Trustworthiness assured that the findings were sound and dependable through member checking done by confirming with all participants that recorded responses were correctly transcribed and endorsed as a true reflection of the actual interviews (Marshall and Rossman 2015). This meant that authenticity and accuracy of the interpretation of events is paramount (Tashakkori and Teddlie 2010).

Ethical Requirements

In conducting this study, the researcher observed the participant's rights by seeking their approval, pledging to observe all their rights such as maintaining privacy, anonymity and confidentiality, avoiding harm, betrayal and deception before involving them including the right to withdraw from participating at any stage of the research (Cohen et al. 2000). Access to the research sites and participants was gained through gatekeepers using the clearance letters from University Ethics Committee and East London District Office as the research required an in-depth study where a substantial amount of time was spent on this undertaking (Shenton and Hayter 2004; Okumus et al. 2007).

RESULTS

Stakeholders' Views on Pre-school Programs

The study set out to explore the stakeholders' views in terms of pre-schools getting children ready for formal school. The following views were expressed by educators:

"Pre-school is crucial in laying a firm foundation for learning."

"It introduces children to the routine of learning, it makes children communicate, associate and are introduced to the pressure of learning."

"Pre-school teaches children to socialise and they share spaces in the classroom and in the playground."

The same question was posed to pre-school educators since they were in the middle of the controversy. Elma who had ten years' experience confidently insisted that *"Pre-school does*

prepare children adequately for formal learning but Grade one teachers expect too much. Children in Grade R have to recognise sounds, days of the week but not writing them, then, we raise the standard by second term when we try to break the language barrier by using less mother tongue and more English." Reiterating comparable opinions was Becky, *"Yes, I think they do because we touch on things that they will learn Grade One. We give them the basics."*

Interviewed parents expressed similar sentiments with one mother saying, *"Ever since my child started pre-school he is always happy and talks a lot, I think it is important for a child to go to pre-school first."* The other mother added, *"Pre-school helps to keep my child safe when I am at work."*

Data emerging from interviews indicates that all stakeholders value the services of pre-school and find it greatly crucial in making the child ready for formal school.

The Status Quo of Pre-schools

It was important for this study to find out the status quo of the pre-schools in the research area in terms of ensuring children are ready for formal school. Bev, the educator advanced that *"It depends on the type of the pre-school. In some schools or centres children spend the day playing although children learn through play it has to be organized. Not all school or centres have organised play."* Similar sentiments were expressed by Suzy who said, *"It depends on the type of pre-school and on the maturity of the child. Where there is lack of stimulation children will not be well developed when they come out. However, there are some children who come straight from home and perform better than those coming from a pre-school."*

Reacting to the same question one mother posited: *"I would think it depends on the pre-school. There is a difference between township pre-schools and affluent pre-schools in the city. In some pre-schools, there is teaching with educational toys while in others there are no planned programs but children just play and sleep all day. Some programs may be adequate but the child's level of maturity will determine the learning progress."* The second mother echoed similar sentiments and added that *"I don't think there is someone who inspects what goes on in these pre-schools because when you drive*

past at 9am children are playing outside and when you drive past after three hours they are still outside."

Embryonic information from interviews seems to suggest that while programs may be adequate in preparing children, factors such as maturity, resources and programs determine the progress children make in terms of being ready for formal schooling. The information supplied by respondents confirm Vygotsky's (1978) theory that learning and growth of the child depends on his/her maturity and the support systems provided by the environment. Coming out clearly is the disparity that exists between different pre-schools such that there is minimal stimulation while in others there is a structured rich curriculum that is followed. The issue on monitoring and supervision seems to be a cause for concern to some stakeholders.

Challenges Pre-schools Face in Developing Formal School Readiness Skills

A question was posed to pre-school educators mainly in an attempt to find out the challenges pre-schools faced in terms of preparing children for formal school. Elma advanced that *"The language barrier is the first challenges we have in the pre-school. Children come from different backgrounds, we try to use English as a common language but children cannot communicate in English. Lack of parental involvement is another challenge because when you ask parents to at least talk to the children in English they say it is my duty to teach English. I also think that maturity counts, because there are some children who show response just as the year ends."* Besides the language Becky added that *"We have many children with conditions such as ADHD, FASD, Down Syndrome and low IQ due to alcoholism, drug abuse, poverty, stress and very young mothers. We have many children who are mentally challenged because of prenatal issues related to alcohol and drug abuse."* Reverberating comparable collective proclamations, the educators in Grade one alleged: *"The biggest challenge is the internal learning of the children with so much alcoholism and drug abuse we have so many children who are mentally damaged, children who can't seem to learn even when you use a variety of strategies and whatever you do you find that the problem is deeper than that. It*

could be psychological and children need evaluation so that they can be helped but because of the inclusive education which is sort of denying children of that specialised attention. Furthermore, government policy says that children cannot repeat the same grade over and over, so children are automatically promoted to the next grade with zero learning. These problems are never addressed as they are pushed through grades. It's all about pen and paper without other strategies that can be done to give them life skills to survive or any careers to pursue after they dismally fail metric."

Interviewed parents also lamented on the inequality in resourcing the schools and some township centres stating that *"Infrastructure and resources are crucial in the learning of children yet in most schools, resources are scarce because due to lack of funds and vandalism."*

Emerging from the interview are a myriad of challenges such as language as a barrier to learning, lack of parental involvement and learning challenges due to some conditions caused by prenatal factors some of which require specialised efforts and combined collaborations to deal with.

Strategies to Improve Formal Readiness

The study went on to find out if stakeholders had any suggestions in terms of pre-school programs improving formal school readiness for children. Pre-school educators echoed on the provision of resources, for example, *"We order stuff and if we are lucky it is delivered towards the end of the year at times nothing comes for the whole year."* The other suggested training, *"I was not trained; I don't have a certificate in teaching but I rely on the workshops that I have attended."*

The Foundation Phase educators proposed the following strategies: *"There are some parents who do not see their children's homework books for the whole week or never at all which is not right. The Business community can support the school by donating resources for learning and teachers in the Foundation Phase can help the pre-school teacher in guiding them on the areas to concentrate on."*

"I think pre-school teachers need to learn to be creative, use Google to access new learn-

ing material and introduce new technology in schools."

Emerging from the interviews were strategies ranging from provision of essential resources timorously, training and development of teachers to parental involvement. Above all, multi-stakeholder participation in the provision of pre-school service is viewed as essential.

DISCUSSION

The study found that all stakeholders valued pre-school as essential it lays a firm foundation for learning. The study confirms worldwide research signifying that pre-school education improves the knowledge and cognitive development of young children (Barnett 2008; Camilli et al. 2010; Phillips and Meloy 2012). Different views of readiness emerged from stakeholders in this study. Parents were happy that children developed socially and were safe in school while pre-school teachers posit that they introduced cognitive learning. Concurring with these finding was the study by Germani et al. (2017) in which stakeholders viewed the purpose of pre-school as engaging children in social activity that developed relationships and molds behaviour through several forms of play. The findings of this study corroborate the assertion by Ackerman et al. (2017) that pre-school enhances children's cognitive abilities that simulate goal-directed actions.

Despite its importance, emerging from the stakeholders in this study was the disparity in terms of the categories of schools or centres, maturity of children, stimulation environments and programs offered at different pre-schools. Findings from of this study are in accord with the ECD review report by Hall et al. (2017) which highlighted that notwithstanding the strides made in the ECD provisioning disparities and challenges still exist in the infrastructural facilities, programs and staff competence across provinces more so with impoverished communities. Furthermore, they confirm the existence of a gap in meeting the requirements to ensure maximum cognitive development through educational stimulation (Hall et al. 2017). These findings reveal disparities that hinder formal school preparedness for many children.

This study found copious challenges facing pre-schools in the research area such as language that was a barrier in preparing six-year-

olds for formal school. This was due to educators' deficiency in understanding the multi-languages and the diverse socio-cultural background of children as Pluddemann et al. (2000) and Viljoen and Molefe (2001) already found out. Educators are failing to cope with the diverse linguistics found in the classrooms. This study reiterates the finding of the nationwide audit of ECD provisioning (Williams and Samuels 2001). Furthermore, the study found that the maturity played a big role in the learning of the child confirming Vygotsky's (1978) theory that development and learning of the child was dependent on his/her maturity and the support systems provided by the environment. The findings revealed inadequacy and inequality in teaching and learning resources, furniture in the classrooms, insignificant financing provided for pre-school in general endorsing the reports by Seleti (2009), DBE et al. (2010) and Atmore et al. (2012) who noted that access to economic benefits was not equal amongst ECD centres.

The study found that educators were grossly inadequate in dealing with children who have learning challenges due to conditions such as ADHD, FAS, FASDs, Down Syndrome and low IQ caused by prenatal factors such as alcoholism, drug abuse, poverty, stress and births from young mothers. Similar findings came from the research carried by Lubbe et al. (2017) in rural schools in which they found a high number of children with performance challenges and problematic behaviour due to FAS. Children exposed to such conditions usually experience difficulties in knowledge acquisition as they grow older (Capaldi 2008). Similarly, the works of Kropenske and Howard (1994) have shown that Fetal Alcohol Syndrome is essentially a series of birth deficiencies associated with prenatal development retardation, post-natal growing retardation, and low weight at birth, peculiarly undersized head, intellectual impairment, developing delays, dysfunctional behaviour and facial abnormalities. It would seem like educators are not well equipped when confronted by children with developmental delays and disorders.

CONCLUSION

The study set out to explore the stakeholders' views on pre-school experiences and formal school readiness of six-year-olds. The study espoused a qualitative research approach using

semi-structured interviews to collect data. In this study the findings revealed that all stakeholders understood the importance of pre-school in laying a strong base for lifelong learning. Despite the importance of pre-school, schools and centres faced a sundry of challenges compelling multi-stakeholder collaboration on intervention to make pre-school viable. The findings also indicate that parental involvement is very minimal in pre-school yet parental keen is high on children's achievement in learning. The study also found that finger pointing is common among educators yet one is expected to make a difference in the child's learning regardless of previous experiences hence clarification of the pre-school curriculum to Grade one teachers is vital.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and propositions from the stakeholders the study recommends that policy makers should anchor their decisions on proven highly effective pre-school education models. The need to have competent educators cannot be over emphasized as much learning takes place in the pre-school. The study recommends that pre-school educators should be intensively trained, receive supervision, coaching, mentoring and continuously improve the process of teaching and learning through workshops and seminars.

Children are subjected to prenatal conditions that are detrimental to their ability to learn hence, the study recommends regularly assessment of children's pre-school learning and development to monitor the extent of goal achievement, and design programs tailor made to develop children according to their capacity to learn, and cater for learning challenges that may have resulted for toxic exposure and the gifted learners. Furthermore, the need to educate and provide substantial assistance to communities on the effects and eradicating substance and drug abuse is of vital importance.

Learning starts at birth yet; focus to learning has been positioned in pre-school learning. This study recommends the designing of comprehensive pre-school education policies that effectively sustain child development from the time they are born to five years and beyond. Equitably equipping all pre-school centres with adequate teaching and learning materials continuously will support the formulated policies.

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