

CONTEXTUAL CHALLENGES IN EARLY LITERACY TEACHING AND LEARNING IN GRADE R RURAL SCHOOLS IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Early literacy teaching and learning in Grade R rural schools experience persistent challenges which compound the low literacy rates evidenced overall in South African schools. In this article we provide an overview of challenges that teachers in selected Gauteng Grade R classrooms experience in delivering a literacy curriculum. Three purposively selected rural schools, each comprising three Grade R classrooms served as research sites. Participants were nine teachers and three Heads of Departments (HOD). Qualitative data was gathered using semi-structured interviews with teachers and the HOD in each school. We also administered a questionnaire and conducted classroom observations to gain first-hand information. Through a process of thematic content analysis the following themes emerged: 1) pedagogical challenges 2) resources and provisioning 3) management and support. Findings illustrate the difficulties that Grade R teachers and management (HOD) experience in delivering a literacy curriculum in schools situated in rural settings. Poverty, unemployment of parents, transport challenges as well as language issues compound the problems the teachers experience in delivering the Grade R literacy curriculum. Furthermore, limited professional training of Grade R teachers has impacted on literacy delivery.

Keywords: Early childhood development, education in rural contexts; emergent literacy; rurality

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

While the impetus for advancing literacy skills for all South Africans, particularly the disadvantaged, for the past 20 years has been acknowledged in programmes such as Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) and Inclusive Education policies, advancement in the realm of education in rural settings in particular has been slow. This is despite the establishment of a directorate for rural education as outlined in the *National Framework for Quality Education in Rural Areas* (DOE, 2006).

Furthermore, among the studies that highlight rural education, the *Emerging Voices Report* (HSRC, 2005), gives attention to the challenges associated with rurality on various levels (Nkambule, Balfour, Pillay & Moletsane, 2011). Balfour, Mitchell and Moletsane (2008) argue that, despite programmes designed to support education in rural environments, there has not been much change in the circumstances surrounding rural education. Researchers confirm that the rate of educational progress in rural settings has been sparse (Nkambule et al., 2011).

Considering that many of the rural areas in South Africa are impoverished, access to basic education is challenging. Such limited educational opportunities reduce families' capacities for poverty reduction and instead, seems to perpetuate the cycle of poverty through the generations. In any country, a justifiable education system that meets the basic learning needs of its citizens is not only a human right, but also a means for reducing poverty, promoting productivity, and sustaining development (Zhang, 2006). In South Africa, the need for literacy development has been recognised and the government has identified the need to increase access to Early Childhood Development (ECD) as well as enhance the quality of ECD programmes and services, specifically for those children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Department of Basic Education (DBE), Department of Social Development (DSD) & UNICEF, 2010).

In the South African education system, the early childhood sector had been marginalised for many years (DBE, et al., 2010). However, recently the early childhood sector has been receiving attention, as emergent literacy in this phase is the precursor for successful literacy acquisition especially as it prepares the learner for formal literacy teaching in Grade 1 (DBE, 2011b). However, regardless of governmental attempts at addressing the multi-layered challenges associated with delivery of quality education, the problems at ECD level persist and will take a while to be fully resolved (DBE, et al., 2010). In particular, while ECD literacy development in general has been slow to receive the necessary attention (DBE, et al., 2010), the need for educational growth and development in rural and semi-rural areas of the country appears paramount (Surty, 2011).

Moletsane (2012: 1, 6) acknowledges that such challenges call for research in rural education, where the focus should be on rural contexts within strength-based paradigms. Hence, the inherent strengths, skills, knowledge and resources (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993) within constrained environments such as in a rural setting, is foregrounded. Other researchers consider it important for higher education institutions to promote research on rural education to form a basis for the development of interventions to improve conditions for rurality and rural education (Nkambule, et al., 2011: 356).

In light of the preceding discussion, the aim of this article is to provide an overview of the challenges which prevent teachers from teaching literacy adequately and learners from acquiring quality literacy skills in Grade R classes in rural South African schools. We report on findings that emerged during the analysis of empirical data gathered from observations and teacher questionnaires from three schools situated in rural contexts in one province in South Africa. First we discuss rural education within a South African context. Thereafter we describe what constitutes Grade R.

Education in rural South African contexts

South Africa has a number of schools situated in various provinces around the country which are considered rural. In 2008 it was reported that 62% of all schools in South Africa are situated in rural areas (Surty, 2011). In this article, the context of "rural" pivots on flexible definitions given the socioeconomic, geographical and personal perspectives and the inclusive orientation it encompasses. The rural context presents with challenges such as the usually isolated setting, access to public transport, school attendance problems and diverse learner backgrounds (some of these challenges are not unique to urban locations). These challenges are verified by the deputy minister of Basic Education in South Africa, (Surty,

2011: 8) in that “rural areas are characterised by various factors that negatively influence the delivery of quality education”.

Typically, rural areas are remote and relatively underdeveloped. As a result, many rural communities and their schools are poor and disadvantaged, lacking basic infrastructure for sanitation, water, roads and other transport, electricity and information and communication technologies (ICT). Lester (2012: 413) explains that poverty in rural areas affects educational resources, experiences and opportunities significantly. A higher number of multi-grade classrooms, with its associated challenges, may be found in rural areas. It is therefore imperative that the uniqueness of rural communities need to be recognised in order to move forward in an effort to provide effective and culturally relevant teaching for learners. It is necessary to consider those issues which affect the learners’ learning and educational experiences as it will enable teachers to reach their learners better.

Thus, it is clear that the socio-economic and cultural context of rural life impacts on education (Nkambule, et al., 2011; Lemmer & Manyike, 2012), hence the challenge is for teachers to understand these challenges and tailor their delivery of the curriculum within these contextual boundaries. White and Kline (2012: 36) emphasise that as a component of teaching education, training should be on the need to raise awareness and understanding of the needs of rural learners, their families and their communities in an effort to deliver quality education for all learners.

While there is a growing recognition of the need to prepare teachers to better understand learner diversity in order that they may effectively deliver pedagogical knowledge, there is little focus on preparing teachers for the diversity of the contexts or communities in which these teachers might find themselves placed. For transformation to take place in rural education, teachers are the most important element as they are responsible for the curriculum and teaching of learners and they need to address rural education as a human right and social justice issue where rural contexts are seen as diverse and where context specific solutions need to be found (Hlalele, 2012: 113-116).

It is imperative that the learning of rural learners needs to be improved and needs to be central in less developed countries’ plans of raising their learners’ levels of learning (including South Africa). What Zhang (2006) found in his research, that sub-Saharan African rural learners had lower levels of family socio-economic status, were older than their urban counterparts, have probably repeated a grade and have less home support for academic work, is also applicable in South African rural schools. In Zhang’s study (2006), reading literacy scores were also significantly lower and rural schools in almost all cases had fewer and lower quality resources such as the quality of school buildings, the number of facilities and equipment, instructional resources and teachers’ reading proficiency of themselves which was also evidenced in this study. Zhang (2006) recommends that school processes such as reading teachers assigned to learners, corrected learner homework, and the frequency of teachers meeting with parents should be improved. Zhang also points out that support at home for learners’ academic work is indispensable.

Grade R and teachers

ECD is officially defined as “an umbrella term that applies to the processes by which children from birth to about 9 years grow and thrive, physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually,

morally and socially” (DOE, 2001: 3). White Paper 5 on Early Childhood Development (DOE, 2001) has been the primary guide to the implementation of universal access to Grade R by 2019. This policy focuses on children from birth to six years of age, with the emphasis on the provision of education to Grade R. The purpose and major thrust of the policy is to ensure the phasing in of Grade R as part of the schooling system. The role of the Department of Basic Education (DBE) is to implement White Paper 5 which informs ECD services; develops a Grade R curriculum and birth to four years age cohort; develops training materials; trains ECD practitioners and paying stipends for trainers and provides services for Grade R children. A medium-term plan is to improve the quality of ECD services by providing skills and career pathing for those who work with children and service providers (DoE, 2001: 3, 9). While there has been a steady increase in participation in Grade R from 15% of the age population in 1999 to 70% in 2010 in schools (DBE, 2011), it has still been reported that only 32% of children in South Africa attend ECD centres.

In the Diagnostic Review of Early Childhood Development draft report (2012: 5) the priority areas to improve ECD education include: “consolidating expansion with improvements in infrastructure, learner support materials and equipment; standardisation of training, qualifications and remuneration of staff; and overall management and integration of Grade R in relation to earlier preschool provision, the foundation phase as a whole, and subsequent schooling”. Additionally attention must be given to the nutrition, health, safe transport and after-school care of Grade R learners. By building human capital/development for the ECD sector in South Africa, one of the priorities is that the Revised National Qualifications Framework (includes career path developed to address gaps) should revise the ECD qualifications by August 2013, and that a teacher development strategy for ECD and Grade R practitioners be implemented from April 2015. Furthermore, this report states that there should be improved accredited provisioning of training for ECD practitioners by more accredited training service providers and that an integrated professional registration system for ECD practitioners (working with children from birth to pre-Grade R) is in place by June 2015 (Diagnostic review of early childhood development report, 2012: 9-10).

Aligned with the preceding discussion, the Department of Basic Education acknowledges that “there is both an *absolute* shortage of teachers and a *relative* shortage of teachers qualified and competent enough to teach specific subjects, in ECD, and in rural and remote schools” (DBE, 2011: 11b). In the foundation phase, an annual replacement of 4 268 African mother-tongue teachers, 755 Afrikaans mother-tongue teachers and 453 English mother-tongue teachers is needed (DBE, 2011b). Factors which contribute to this problem include amongst others uncertainty about transformation such as a new curriculum unaccompanied by adequate training; low job satisfaction and poor working conditions (DBE, 2011b). Furthermore, existing Grade R (reception year) practitioners need to be professionally qualified. Yet many more of the Grade R practitioners need to become professionally qualified in this field (DBE, 2011b).

While from a curriculum perspective Grade R is the first year of primary schooling, it is differently financed and staffed. Since 2001, the government has funded Grade R in two ways. Firstly, provincial governments funded grants to community-based ECD centres on a per-learner basis. Secondly, a direct grant in aid from provincial education departments (PEDs) to school governing bodies which employ the teachers, finances Grade R in public primary schools. The recommended practitioner: learner ratio as articulated in the Guidelines for Costing Basic Minimum Package of Grade R inputs (2008) is 30:1. According to the

Public Expenditure tracking study conducted in three provinces, more than 40% of the Grade R classes have more than 40 learners per practitioner. Considering that ECD must be viewed holistically taking into account the young child's physical, motor, emotional, social, and cognitive and language development, it is doubtful whether the teacher-learner ratio allows sufficient time for all areas to be developed.

The Curriculum Assessment and Policy Statement (CAPS)

According to the Curriculum Assessment and Policy Statement (CAPS) for Grade R, the focus is on play-based learning through which integration into other key areas for child development is expected to occur. During these play-based activities incidental learning opportunities are expected to be facilitated by the teacher. Thus, incidental as well as teacher planned and coordinated learning opportunities are expected to enhance literacy learning (DBE, 2011a).

Given the challenges experienced with outcomes-based education (Janks, 2014), the curriculum incorporated into the CAPS policy (DBE, 2011a) is intended to offer structured guidelines on what is being taught, which in this case, is language and literacy. It thus seems that minimal attention was given to Grade R teaching prior 2012. The new curriculum (CAPS) was initiated during 2012 to take the place of Outcomes-Based Education (OBE) which included Grade R to 12 (NEEDU, 2012). The content of the CAPS policy is an amendment of the National Curriculum Statement (Pinnock, 2011). Work plans are provided for language teaching and these include listening and speaking, reading and viewing, and writing and presenting (Janks, 2014; DBE, 2011a). According to the CAPS document (Grades R-3), learners in the foundation phase will be exposed to Home Language (HL) (6 hours) and First Additional Language (FAL) (4/5 hours). The CAPS documents provide guidelines on how much time should be spent on each topic and which content should be covered in that time.

While teachers welcome the structured guidelines and the reduction in time-consuming administrative tasks as outlined in the CAPS document, as compared to the National Curriculum statement, many teachers find CAPS to be too detailed and overwhelming (Catholic Institute of Education, 2010). There are also concerns being raised regarding the nature of the curriculum which requires teachers to have special skills and knowledge (Catholic Institute of Education, 2010). Proper and successful implementation of the curriculum will require teachers to obtain these skills. Implementation of CAPS in Grades R to 3 commenced in 2012.

Given the background we provided, we embarked on this study to provide an overview of the challenges that teachers in selected rural Gauteng Grade R classrooms experience in delivering a literacy curriculum. We were guided in this enquiry by the following research question: What are the contextual challenges and how do these influence literacy teaching and learning in selected grade R rural classrooms in South Africa? In order to understand the findings of the study, it is necessary to provide a context of the research sites.

CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND OF THE SCHOOLS IN THE STUDY

School 1:

Location and context of the school

This school, which is situated in a rural context, serves 1200 learners from four informal settlements in the nearby urban and semi-urban areas. There are 105 learners in Grade R who are divided into three classes with a mean of 35 learners per class. This is a fee paying school and it has a feeding scheme for indigent learners. The school relies on donations from businesses in the nearby town for further funding. Most teachers at the school are white and the majority of the learners are black with a minority of around 20 white learners. Although the language of learning and teaching in the school is English, the languages spoken in the community are isiZulu and isiXhosa. Grade R teachers are paid the subsidy provided by the Department of Basic Education. They also receive a limited top-up amount from the school. The school is categorised as a quintile 4 school, implying that, despite its location, it is not regarded as disadvantaged. According to the principal of School 1, the Annual National Assessments (ANA) results for foundation phase in 2014 for Mathematics and English respectively, were; Mathematics - Grade 1 (77%), Grade 2 (56%) and Grade 3 (62%) and English results were reported as Grade 1 (71%), Grade 2 (56%) and Grade 3 (62%).

This school has adequate sporting facilities with four rugby fields and an athletic track. Assemblies and school functions are held in a hall on the premises. The main school building is constructed of brick and mortar and is in a reasonable condition. The office block is equipped with an alarm system and linked to a security company. The school has a telephone line, internet access and computers in the administration office. Despite the security measures taken, the school is often prey to vandalism and robberies after hours.

In all three of the classrooms, the researchers observed that equipment recently received from the DBE had not yet been opened. The charts on the wall comprised of feelings and emotions, calendar, and number cards. The letterland cards were pasted too high almost close to the ceiling. During the observed lesson, no reference was made to any of these charts. The reading corner contained a few books which looked old, and unsuitable magazines. No large print books were in sight. There were no reading opportunities such as children's names on the pigeon holes and on their seats.

During the observation phase of the study, the researchers spent approximately one hour per class. In the first classroom, we observed the literacy lesson which was conducted in the morning. The language used during this lesson was English. The learners were seated on a carpeted section on the floor. We observed the teacher leading the discussion on "what did you do this weekend?" Each learner provided a response and the teacher went on to the next learner. The teacher did not repeat the information for the benefit of those learners seated at the back and who could not hear the discussion clearly. It seemed that the teacher struggled with classroom management and tended to shout at the learners. She also blew on a whistle, possibly to regain classroom control.

At the second classroom, the researchers observed an assessment and free group activity. Each learner was asked to identify the letters of the alphabet from "a" to "r". The teacher appeared to be in better control as the learners were responsive to the teacher and the lesson.

School 2:

Location and context of the school

School 2 serves the community of a farming area on the outskirts of a large town. A total of 1100 learners attend. There are currently three Grade R classes and each class has an average of 30 learners. The school is a non-paying fee school and indigent learners are provided with breakfast and lunch daily. Learners wear school uniforms or casual clothes to school. There are two white and one black female teacher who teach the Grade R classes. The majority of learners who attend this school are black with only five white learners. The language of learning and teaching is English while the languages spoken in the community are Setswana, isiZulu and isiXhosa. The school is categorised as a quintile 1 school. According to the principal of School 2, the 2014 ANA results for foundation phase mathematics and English respectively were recorded as; Mathematics - Grade 1 (71%), Grade 2 (73%) and Grade 3 (56%) and English Grade 1 (71%), Grade 2 (65%) and Grade 3 (51%).

The researchers observed that there was also an ablution block as well as a kitchen which was housed under a separate roof area and used to serve the Grade R learners' breakfast and lunch. There is no electricity or running water in the classrooms.

The classes are equipped with tables and chairs for the learners, educational equipment, books, paint, shelves, black boards, puzzles, toys, and wall charts. The equipment were either placed in boxes or randomly packed on shelves. The classrooms were not very neat and tidy with dust and dirt clearly noticeable.

In the first classroom, we observed the class engaged in story time. The teacher read a story to the learners. They were seated on a carpeted section of the classroom. The learners appeared uninterested in the story of the "Frog and the Princess". The teacher did not provide opportunities for the learners to engage in the story. The illustrations in the book were too small for the learners at the back to see and no other visual aids or resources were used to draw the learners' interest and enthusiasm. Furthermore, little opportunity for question and answer or any other higher order thinking skills were encouraged. Types of questions that the teacher asked: "What are the pictures about?" "What are they doing?" "Who can tell me a story?" Upon completion, the teacher asked the learners to recite their own stories and other nursery rhymes such as "Twinkle, twinkle, little star" and "Two little dickie birds". No interest or enthusiasm was displayed by the learners. One researcher reflected that the teacher and the learners looked almost "depressed".

In the second classroom, the teacher also read the "Frog and the princess". However, we observed that the atmosphere in this classroom was more interactive than the first. The teacher's expression when reading, was good and she allowed the learners sufficient time to process the events in the story. The learners were asked to draw pictures on their slate boards of the frog, the princess and the pool. However, no dusters to clean the boards were available. The learners used their sleeves or their hands to clean their boards. However, the children appeared relaxed. After the story, the teacher played music from her iPad to which the learners performed the actions. The theme of the week appeared to be "winter", although this was not displayed on the theme table. The teacher asked questions such as: "What do we wear in winter?" and "What do we eat in winter?"

School 3:

Location and context of the school

This school is situated in a rural farming area next to a small river. All the teachers and the majority of learners in the school are black. Grade R learners wore school uniforms. This is a non-fee paying school with a total number of 958 learners. The language of learning and teaching is English while the languages spoken in the community are Setswana, isiZulu and isiXhosa. The school is categorised as a quintile 1 school. According to the principal of School 3, the Annual National Assessments (ANA) results for foundation phase in 2014 for Mathematics and English respectively, were; Mathematics - Grade 1 (66%), Grade 2 (56%) and Grade 3 (56%) and English - Grade 1 (55%), Grade 2 (52%) and Grade 3 (52%). School 3 is an underperforming school.

The school grounds are barren with a large, dusty, stony, sparsely grassed open field. This serves as the play area for all the learners from Grade R to Grade 7. The buildings are in need of repair and cleaning. A lot of dust is visible all over corridors, in classes and in the main offices. A large amount of litter was lying around on the day the researchers visited the school.

One class near the open field was rather small without any additional toilets or storeroom. The condition of the class was not conducive to learning as learners have to share tables and chairs and very little equipment was observed in the classroom. The second class bordered the small polluted river and the Grade R playground. The grass in this area was uncut and litter was lying all over the school property. Dirty muddy water lay in gutters which were obviously used to wash various items of a person staying in a small room adjacent to the class. The third class was unoccupied as it has recently been delivered to the school. The grass which surrounded the two classes next to the river was uncut. While many learners are transported by taxis, there are a large number who walk home to farms and small holdings in the area.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research paradigm, design and participant selection

We followed an interpretivist approach (Nieuwenhuis, 2007), which allowed us research opportunities to observe participants in their natural environments in order to understand how contextual challenges in selected grade R classrooms in rural settings possibly influence literacy development.

We used the purposive sampling approach (Maree, 2010), to select schools that met the criteria of being an ECD site (that is, they included Grade R classes) and for being defined as rural. At each ECD site, we engaged all the Grade R teachers as participants in the study. Thus, the final sample comprised of three rural schools which had three Grade R classrooms and from these we were able to draw a sample comprising nine Grade R teachers and three Heads of Departments. All participants were female and under 40 years of age. Their qualifications ranged from a Grade 12 certificate to a teacher's diploma in education.

Table 1: School information

	Number of teachers and their gender	Mean number of learners per class	Total number of learners in Grade R
School 1	3 female	35	105
School 2	3 female	24	73
School 3	3 female	33	100

We obtained ethical clearance from the relevant university’s research ethics committee prior to commencing this study. Furthermore, we also obtained permission to conduct this study from the Gauteng Department of Education. To enhance the processes of triangulation (Creswell, 2007) and crystallisation (Janesick, 2000), we employed multiple qualitative data collection strategies to elicit information concerning literacy development in rural ECD centres. Strategies included face-to-face individual interviews with the teachers, and the HOD at each school and open-ended questions by means of a questionnaire (pertaining predominantly to literacy teaching and learning) and school/classroom observations that were conducted by the researchers. We adopted a thematic content analysis approach (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007) to manually analyse the data. Patterns and commonalities were clustered into themes and sub-themes.

PRESENTATION OF RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A short background sketch is provided before presenting the results and discussion. The on-site visits were around three hours each. Our focus was on the presentation of literacy lessons as well as the general layout and functioning of the classrooms. In all three rural schools the language of learning and teaching was English. Schools 1 & 2 were print-rich classrooms, while school 3 had the material, but it wasn’t being used. The classroom routines were provided on the walls, but not necessarily followed by the teachers in all three schools. The teachers were mostly involved in alphabetic knowledge, storytelling and songs in schools 1 & 2 on the day of the visit. School 3 teachers presented basic numeracy, rhymes and songs. The majority of the teachers concentrated on rote learning using rhymes to display their interaction with the learners. Learners chanted the rhymes endlessly. Only two classes from school 1 and 2 respectively engaged in informal writing activities.

Through a process of thematic content analysis (Cohen et al., 2007) the following themes emerged: 1) infrastructure and provisioning; 2) pedagogical challenges; 3) management and support. These themes are discussed in the following sections:

Theme 1: Infrastructure and provisioning

The schools in this study experienced numerous contextual challenges. This was clear to the researchers and much of the data reported in this section was obtained from the researchers direct observations of the schools, classrooms and lessons. For example, school 1 frequently experiences either water shortages or a total lack of water for many days and months. Other schools also experience frequent electricity and water shortages. Teachers in this study recognised poverty and language difficulties as barriers that learners face at the school. Parental and home challenges include unemployment, lack of food and lack of finances to pay school fees. Parents also find it difficult to provide transport to get their children to

school. For example, according to a teacher at school 1: *many learners stay [at school] for long periods of time after school hours mainly due to a lack of transport.*

At all three rural schools, due to a lack of classroom space, mobile classrooms (large, prefab, modular containers) have been provided by the Department of Basic Education, and are utilised as classrooms for the three Grade R classes. They appear to be adequately equipped. Despite the resources, sufficient space for the learners and the teacher is problematic. The researchers observed that as a result of limited space, learners' book bags are placed outside the classroom, on the gravel. However, the placing of bags outside the classroom seems to be the norm at all schools irrespective of its location. Inside the classroom, chairs and tables are stacked and only brought down for table-top, writing activities (school 1 & 2). This exercise is not only time-consuming but also disruptive to the smooth flow of lessons. In the third classroom at school 2, it was observed that a section of the ceiling was missing. This results in rainwater pouring in as well as a cold draught in winter.

While some of the resources for the schools have been provided by the Department of Basic Education, other resources have been purchased by the school (school 1). School 2 has limited resources to purchase additional resources while school 3, as a non-fee paying school, does not have the funds to purchase additional resources. Teachers in the study mentioned that their classrooms contained resources such as: Letterland, puzzles, play dough, paint and paintbrushes, toy musical instruments, charts, pictures on the wall, a sand tray and equipment, a birthday chart, a few books, a fantasy corner and gross motor equipment. School 1 also has a television and a video recorder. In classroom 2 at school 2, the teacher used an iPad to play a song to the learners. On inquiry we found this was her own iPad which she uses due to the lack of power and other technology. It was observed by the researchers that while there appears to be loads of equipment that lined the shelves in the Grade R classes, they appear to be seldom used or opened as layers of dust covered the boxes of puzzles, books and toys.

Despite the potentially useful resources at the teachers' disposal, the researchers observed that they were largely underutilised. For example, in all three schools, it was observed that: charts were often displayed well above the eye level of the learners and a perusal of the books on display showed that these are not always age appropriate as the print and the pictures in the books were too small for Grade R. While it was encouraging to note the introduction of technological devices in the classroom (iPad), the learners were not shown any visuals and thus appeared bored. The researchers did not observe any other equipment in use as they only observed a literacy lesson.

At school 1, an IT reading programme, which is run privately, exists. Grade 2 learners are withdrawn from the classes to participate in the programme. Grade Rs do not have access to a pre-reading programme. Furthermore, the HOD in school 1 reported that the school computers are not being utilised as the school has not yet employed a teacher in this capacity due to a lack of funds. The position is not a departmental position. The School Governing Body (SGB) would have to pay such a person should one be appointed.

Theme 2: Pedagogical challenges

In this study, it was clear that multiple challenges at the pedagogical level impeded the successful delivery of the CAPS curriculum with specific reference to literacy teaching and learning for Grade R. Teachers at school 1 were deemed not sufficiently knowledgeable by

their HOD who further indicated that although they use Letterland, “teachers don’t know enough about it and need more training” (school 1, HOD).

Moreover, this seemingly limited knowledge was reflected in the challenges teachers experienced in developing uniform lesson preparation (school 1, HOD). At all three schools and across all the classrooms, teachers struggled to adhere to a set timetable and to follow the daily programme. In school 1, it was observed that one teacher adjusted the timetable as the need arose. Her class was the most disorderly class of the three and she wasn’t prepared for her lesson at all.

Teachers experienced the implementation of the CAPS curriculum as taxing despite regular meetings with the HOD to facilitate planning, preparation and assessment. In response to the question, “*what is your perception of teachers’ knowledge of the pedagogy of teaching literacy?*” during the HOD interview, one HOD mentioned that as teachers struggle with teaching, they engaged in workshops each term and these were aimed at “*developing skills and offering support*”. However, the HOD at school 3 did not elaborate on who the facilitators of these workshops were and whether they were receiving any curriculum support. Hence, it seemed to the researchers, from their conversations with the teachers and the HOD that support for curriculum implementation from officials from the Department of Education, was either limited or totally lacking. It was thus clear that teachers tended to rely on the knowledge of the HOD in curriculum delivery support.

The implications of teachers’ limited or almost no formal qualification (except a Grade 12 certificate) in teaching Grade R reflect in the delivery of the lessons. For example, during observations it emerged that teachers in all the classrooms recited stories to learners from books that contained diminutive pictures and print. The pictures were so small that the learners seated on the floor to the back of the room could not see the pictures and thus disengaged from the story that was being recited. Teachers seemed to lack the skills in planning and organisation of their lessons which resulted in many learners being “left out” of the teaching-learning process. Furthermore, the lack of effective lesson preparation and classroom management meant that often, the lessons appeared without direction and this resulted in classroom chaos. Learners were observed by the researchers to be either bored or distracted as they chatted to each other or looked intently at the observers. According to the HOD at school 1, [teachers] “*fear the unfamiliar [and] avoid exploring and being more creative*” (HOD interview). Therefore, the HOD acknowledges that the preparation of the learners for Grade 1 is “*not up to standard*” (HOD interview).

On a positive note, Grade R teachers in school 1 are keen to expand their levels of formal training. In school 1 and 2 the unqualified teachers were rather anxious about not having a suitable Grade R qualification which is required by DBE (by 2018). At school 1, teachers also attend in-service training once a term after which they receive feedback from the HOD. This is intended as a developmental process for the teachers. Teachers here also attend the Vereniging vir Voorskoolse Opvoeding en Sorg (Association for the Education and Care of Young Children) (VVOS) workshops as a further form of development. At school 3, the HOD noted that “*teachers were not motivated to improve their teaching*” (school 3, HOD interview).

Another challenge outlined by the teachers (in their responses to the questionnaire as well as the HOD interviews), is that teachers and learners are using at least two different languages

(other home languages such as isiXhosa, isiZulu, Sepedi, Afrikaans, etc.) in their teaching and learning of English literacy. In school 2, it was observed that although the LoLT was English, the children spoke Setswana and at times, the teacher communicated in Afrikaans. Furthermore, HODs mentioned that another challenge teachers face is the “*different cultures and languages*” they needed to adapt to. Apart from different South African cultures, there were also foreign learners from Zimbabwe and Mozambique who attended these schools and spoke their mother tongue. At school 2, the learners spoke a combination of Setswana, isiZulu and Tshivenda. For example, during the observation, teachers recited a story in English and then switched to a mother-tongue language in their explanations or when asking questions. Another commonly observed feature in the classrooms was the learners’ rote recitation of common English traditional nursery rhymes. The researchers observed that often, the words were not pronounced correctly and it didn’t seem likely that the learners understood the words in the rhyme.

Theme 3: Management and Support

The HODs at the different schools emphasise the role they play in supporting the teachers and learners and in this way, the development of literacy in Grade R classrooms at their schools. Together with challenges they experience with underqualified teachers and limited resources, they also need to deal with challenges associated with limited parental involvement (mostly absent parents). In most cases, parents are not involved in their children’s schooling as their children attend school by means of public transport, or they walk to school, thus reducing the chance of a face-to-face meeting with the teachers. Other parents, who drop off their children at school, do not attempt to meet the teachers. The HOD at school 1 feels that she requires an additional stipend for being the HOD as she carries numerous additional tasks. The HOD at school 3 also expressed similar sentiments that there was “*too much work involved and no compensation [for that]*” (school 3, HOD interview). The HOD at school 2 cited the “*social situation of children (poverty)*” as one of the major indicators of the challenges the school is faced with. She stated that a feeding scheme for the whole school was definitely needed. Given these challenges, providing a better education for the children remains a daily battle.

DISCUSSION

From an analysis of the data that emerged from this study, it is clear that the challenges and obstacles facing the delivery of literacy programmes to Grade R learners in rural contexts are numerous and significant (Surtly, 2011). Janks (2014: 17) lists the literacy challenges in primary schools in general which include “children who speak languages that do not often appear in print; who do not have access to books, magazines, or newspapers at home; and who live in print-poor rural communities, schools are key to children’s literacy development”. It is concerning that despite the response to address these challenges in an effort to raise the literacy levels starting from ECD, it seems that we are a “country which is rich in policy but often regarded as poor in implementation” (Mitchell, De Lange & Thi Xuan Thuy, 2008: 101). This is clearly the case when one considers that only 35% of Grade R learners in South Africa meet the minimum criteria for early literacy development (De Witt, 2009).

At the crux of these challenges and policy implementation is the educators, who are often not adequately prepared and equipped in terms of resources or skills, but who may be willing to

address these challenges and to implement policy. Results from this study have pointed out that many Grade R teachers are in the process of acquiring formal teaching qualifications which attest to their commitment improvement. It seems that teachers are aware that one of the main issues that give rise to pedagogical challenges lies in the low levels of formal training (or qualifications) in Grade R teaching (DBE, 2008) and are attempting to address the problem. The DBE (2008) particularly points out that many teachers have an underdeveloped understanding of teaching literacy, reading and writing, while others simply do not know how to teach reading, and still others only know one method of teaching reading, which does not cater for the learning needs of all their learners. The interpretation and successful implementation of the CAPS policy seems to be a hurdle for Grade R teachers as well (Catholic Institute of Education, 2010). Many teachers do not feel adequately prepared to teach according to CAPS guidelines which can be attributed to insufficient and inadequate training (Catholic Institute of Education, 2010).

According to McQuaide (2009) a key hurdle impeding the development of basic education in rural areas is the lack of suitably qualified teachers. Across all the Grade R classrooms in this study, the HODs stated that the Grade R teachers did not possess the necessary qualifications to teach Grade R. In school 1, two teachers have a level 5 qualification and another has a National Senior Certificate qualification. This is clear in the way that many teachers in this study are either furthering their education or intend to do so. The most current commitment to education from the government, and which is encouraging, is the following: “The number of qualified teachers entering the public service is projected to increase from 8 227 in 2012/13 to 10 200 in 2017/18 (Budget Vote, 2015). However, this still has to materialise, and in the interim the question should be asked whether short courses or in-service training or both would be the solution. Currently qualifications that are being offered for aspiring teachers and practicing teachers, follow.

According to the Policy Framework for universal access to Grade R, the draft policy on Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications aligned with the Higher Education Qualifications Framework (HEQF) provides for qualifications in Grade R Practices. Due to the diverse qualification levels of current Grade R practitioners, various qualifications for Grade R Practices have been considered - Higher Certificate in Grade R Practices (NQF level 5, 120 credits), Advanced Certificate in Grade R Practices (NQF level 6, 120 credits), Diploma in Grade R Practices (NQF level 6, 360 credits). The Diploma in Grade R Practices is the proposed initial qualification for this sector. All new entrants to the sector without prior ECD qualifications would need to enrol for this qualification (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2011).

The Higher Certificate and Postgraduate Certificate are proposed as access qualifications for current Grade R practitioners. The Grade R practitioners with ECD level 4 and 5 qualifications (on the 5-level NQF) have an option to complete either or both of Higher Certificate in Grade R Practices (NQF level 5, 120 credits), Advanced Certificate in Grade R Practices (NQF level 6, 120 credits) before enrolling for the Diploma in Grade R Practices (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2011).

The link between teachers understanding the contexts in which they teach is crucial for effective literacy development. Classroom instruction and activities are negatively affected when teachers know little about the community in which they teach. Research has indicated that teachers teach more effectively when they understand their learners’ home lives and

home communities and utilise this information within their curriculum and teaching pedagogy (Asselin, 2001).

According to Barley and Beesley (2007), the four key components of success at school level are leadership, instruction, professional community and the school environment. Barley and Beesley (2007) believe that the principal plays an important role in achieving the key components of success. As an advantage for rural schools, close relationships, both among individuals and between school and community, are characteristic of smaller schools. The principal's ability to thrive in these conditions and adapt to unique characteristics of the school and community is critical. Successful rural schools result from the leadership these principals provide within the context of the local environment. It was clear from this study that HODs assumed leadership roles when they provided pedagogical support in the form of workshops to Grade R teachers contributed to the schools' teaching successes. Hlalele (2012: 116) contends that "*even though rural communities possess assets not found elsewhere and can offer certain benefits, they need specialised support.*" Specifically, rural Grade R teachers require specialised support and training given the contextual challenges that compound the teaching and learning challenges. Such support may be provided at different levels for example: a) pedagogical support: specialised training for Grade R teachers in understanding and implementing the CAPS policy document could be provided by members of the District Based Support Team (DBST); b) resources and provisioning: increased resourcing and specifically training in the utilisation of resources is mandatory. Furthermore, given the problems with transport in this rural and isolated setting, free transport to learners, parents and teachers alike could help alleviate some of the challenges linked with learner and teacher attendance at school. Bantwini and King-McKenzie (2011) argue that without support from the school or district officials; teachers are unable to apply their acquired knowledge and skills to benefit learners.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The relatively small sample size of three schools with three Grade R classrooms in one province in South Africa may be regarded as a limitation to the study. Even so, small case studies have merit in that they can provide an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Mertens, 2010).

CONCLUSION

The research conducted in the three selected rural schools in Gauteng provides a glimpse of a number of challenges faced by the learners, teachers and Heads of Departments respectively, in the access to or delivery of a literacy curriculum. Impoverished access to basic and essential commodities such as running water, food, transport, sufficient learner and teaching resources, qualified teachers and language barriers are only a few aspects which once again need mentioning in the quest of literacy delivery. A more vigorous strategic plan and adequate financial assistance could possibly provide some relief to rural schools and better literacy education for learners.

While it has been made clear in this study that external support has been targeted at improving the infrastructure of rural schools and that the Department of Basic Education has been adequately equipping the schools with basic necessities, it is still a long way ahead to

expect that Grade R teachers, with minimal training, would be able to raise the standards of literacy education without further and intensive training and support. Given the multi-level challenges facing literacy teaching and learning as outlined in this study, the starting point for Grade R teachers in rural schools could be to improve their qualifications.

In the draft policy on Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2011: 42) which is aligned with the Higher Education Qualifications, to improve supply and retention of teachers the following is recommended: enhance the image of teachers; improve working conditions; provide greater profession recognition; increase salaries and benefits; recall resigned teachers; offer special incentives to teach in rural schools; pay teachers of key subjects to work more hours; test teachers who teach key subjects and are not qualified; encourage matriculants and undergraduates to join the profession. It is also stated in this document (p 45) that Grade R teachers be encouraged to improve their qualifications and become qualified at NQF level 5, Grade R/ECD or higher.

It is clear that teacher development support structures and functions need to improve (department officials to support teachers) and funding mechanisms for teacher education and development need to improve. Considering that 2019 is targeted as the year by which Grade R will become compulsory, teachers need to ensure that they are thoroughly prepared to deliver a Grade R literacy programme. There is much work that lies ahead.

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