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# Inclusive education and insufficient school readiness in Grade 1: Policy versus practice

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- The impact of insufficient school readiness on learning in Grade 1
- Experiences and concerns of Grade 1 teachers

# Introduction

- The transition from the informal preschool environment to the formal learning environment in Grade 1 is one of the most important milestones in the development of young learners.
- A smooth transition to the formal learning environment in Grade 1 is essential for a positive academic identity and a successful school career.



# What does school readiness entail?



# The multidimensional construct of school readiness

- School readiness can be defined as “a multidimensional construct that incorporates all aspects of a child’s life that contribute directly to that child’s ability to learn” (McGettigan & Gray, 2012:16).
- These aspects include children who are ready to learn, schools that are ready to accommodate learners with diverse needs, as well as parents and communities who support learners’ development (Roberts, Lim, Doyle & Anderson, 2011:117).



# The importance of school readiness

- Children who are ready for formal learning, will be able to pay attention, manage their own behaviour, relate to their teacher and their peers and in doing so, will be able to master the concepts taught in the early grades (Duncan et al. 2006:4).
- These children have an advantage when starting school because they have a solid foundation on which they can build (Al-Hassan et al. 2009:225).

What is expected from a learner  
at school entry?

# Criteria for the personal school readiness of the learner

- The personal school readiness of the learner at school entry entails more than just academic skills.
- Non-cognitive skills include the ability to adapt, ask questions, cooperate with peers, respect people and property, as well as physical skills, independence, and effective communication skills.



# Criteria for the personal school readiness of the learner

- The criteria for the personal readiness of the learner at school entry were proposed by the National Education Goals Panel (NEGP, 1991), and include
  - physical well-being and motor development;
  - social-emotional development;
  - approaches to learning;
  - language usage and communication skills;
  - and cognitive skills and general knowledge .

# Preschool stimulation

- Attending preschools where quality programmes are offered, is essential for ensuring school readiness, especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- Children from poor families are less likely to experience a stimulating environment at home. Unfortunately they are also less likely to have access to early education programmes (Magnuson et al. 2007:33).

Poverty and deprivation are  
the main causes of  
insufficient school readiness



# The South African Context:

According to statistics 68% of South African children live in poverty.

(The Presidency, Republic of South Africa/UNICEF 2009)

As a result, many of them do not reach the required level of school readiness by the time they start school, and therefore they do not meet the criteria that would qualify them as ready for formal learning.

# The effect of poverty and deprivation on school readiness

- When children grow up in poor communities they are exposed to malnutrition, crime and a lack of preschool stimulation.
- The more risks the family faces, the greater the gap will be between the level of school readiness these children have reached and the level of school readiness that is expected from them at the time of school entry (Farver et al. 2006:196).



# The responsibility of the school

“... the main objective of any education system in a democratic society is to provide quality education for all learners so that they will be able to reach their full potential and will be able to meaningfully contribute to and participate in that society throughout their lives”

(RSA DoE 2001)





# According to the policy for Inclusive Education:

Inclusive schools must recognise and respond to the diverse needs of their students, accommodating both different styles and rates of learning and ensuring quality education to all through appropriate curricula, organizational arrangements, teaching strategies, resource use and partnerships with their communities.

(UNESCO 1994:11-12)

# Research methods

A qualitative approach was followed in this case study, which aimed to explore the impact of insufficient school readiness on teaching and learning in Grade 1.

Two urban schools in Pretoria that currently accommodate large numbers of learners from disadvantaged backgrounds were selected through purposeful sampling.

Focus group interviews were conducted with the Grade 1 teachers of the selected schools.



- *“The pace, the requirements ... It is as if they want to teach these children too soon too many things, they are not ready for it. The policy and the reality in the classroom and what the department gives us, those DoE books, nothing comes together.”*
- *“It’s too much for them. I mean they should still be playing at this stage and to sit down and do formal work, they are really not ready yet. And formal assessment so much each day, it’s tiring for them.”*



- *“For example the mathematics, it is a problem, because they did not master one concept properly, then the next one is there. The foundation is not laid properly, that is why we have so many learning problems later on.”*
- *“A big problem is their language – it is not their mother tongue, it is not mother tongue instruction. We first have to get these little children on a level where you can continue with teaching. It is a big problem for me . . . they do not understand the language . . .”*

- *“Emotionally they are not ready yet, they do not know how to handle themselves.”*
- *“. . . another thing is listening skills, these little ones are not able to listen, discipline, it is a big problem. They cannot sit on a chair yet, they cannot sit still for one second . . . and the basic things that a young child of six already should know, they do not know.”*

- *“... and then they are far too young. We had one who just turned six today. Many of these little ones are intelligent, but not at all ready to be here, emotionally they can't handle the pressure.”*
- *“In my class I cannot do group work, they fight about everything, they cannot share, give one another a chance, take turns.”*



- *“And many times I can see that a child is losing all interest, ‘I cannot do it, so why should I try?’”*
- *“The ANA tests are like dark clouds above our heads, because if you don’t do well, you are called in and they have a serious talk with you. Now we put a lot of pressure on these children. I feel we go much too fast with them, we have to slow down, but we cannot, we have to get through all this work before September. I get nightmares about it, these ANA tests and my children have to perform.”*

# Research findings

- The predominant concern of the Grade 1 teachers in this study, was that their learners are not ready for the current curriculum.
- They felt that the curriculum is inaccessible and that the pace and expectations are unrealistic.
- In their experience, certain education policies seem to work against inclusivity.

# Unrealistic pace and expectations

- *‘I just feel that we expect too much of these children . . . we are not going to make it at this pace, we just expect too much of them. It is not fair towards the children some of these children just give up, because it is just too much.’*



# Policy versus practice

Although Education White Paper 6 (RSA DoE 2001) states that providing quality education to all learners requires adapting curricula, teaching strategies and organisational arrangements to meet the needs of the learners, the teachers in this study feel that they are not allowed the freedom to do so.

# Teachers' experiences

- The expectations of the new curriculum are too high and the work load is too heavy.
- They have no choice but to start with the formal work even though they know that their learners are not ready for it.
- They are not allowed enough time in the curriculum to lay a proper foundation.
- They have to spend too much of their teaching time on formal assessment.

# The school's responsibility

- The school (and the people responsible for compiling the curriculum), should be flexible and prepared to adapt the curriculum according to learners' needs.
- Schools have a responsibility to provide positive learning environments as well as positive learning experiences for their learners (Piotrkowski et al. 2001).



# Teachers' experiences

- They see their learners struggling, becoming discouraged, and in some cases crying when they are unable to meet the demands of the formal learning situation.
- They see the damage that is being done to the confidence of their learners.
- This leaves them feeling helpless and frustrated.

When so many research studies worldwide have shown the necessity of adapting the curriculum to support vulnerable learners, why are teachers in the South African context not allowed the freedom to do so?

# Teachers' experiences regarding school policies

- Due to the teacher-learner ratio, they have 27 to 30 learners per Grade 1 class. Individual attention to vulnerable learners is not possible.
- Heterogeneous grouping of learners:  
The learners with insufficient school readiness need a slow working tempo, with additional work on a concrete level and individual support.
- Homogeneous grouping would allow the teachers to prepare their lessons according to the learning abilities of their learners.



# Teachers' experiences

- Excessive assessment is another concern.
- They are concerned about the effect of repeated experiences of failure on their learners.
- Teachers have to do what is expected of them and not what they believe is in the best interest of their learners.
- Are we creating positive learning experiences for our learners?

It seems as if the inaccessible curriculum, excessive assessment of the learners, and the policies on teacher-learner ratios and heterogeneous grouping of learners are in fact creating barriers to learning by taking away teachers' freedom to implement the principles of inclusive education.

Does this mean that our schools are not ready to support learners with insufficient school readiness?



Instead of a smooth transition to the formal learning environment, many Grade 1 learners are traumatised, because they cannot keep up with the pace and requirements of the formal learning situation, resulting in feelings of failure, discouragement and poor self-esteem, which in turn will have a negative long-term effect on their academic performance.

THANK YOU

# Physical well-being and motor development

- Readiness to learn requires physical health and fitness, including adequate energy levels for classroom and playground activities (Janus & Duku, 2010).
- Insufficient sleep results in low energy levels, a shortened attention span, a tendency to fall asleep during class time, mood swings, oppositional behaviour and a lack of motivation (Ravid et al. 2009).



# Physical well-being and motor development

- Motor development include gross motor skills, fine motor skills, motor coordination and visual-motor skills (Pagani et al. 2010:987; Roberts et al. 2011:117).
- Motor development can be seen as a prerequisite for perceptual and cognitive abilities(Piek et al. 2007: 669).

# Emotional well-being and social competence

- The structured setting of formal teaching and learning in Grade 1 is characterised by routine and rules (Roberts et al. 2011:117).
- Social demands of the classroom environment include social expectations by the teacher and the peers, classroom rules that need to be obeyed and the forming of friendships (Bulotsky-Shearer, Fantuzzo & McDermott, 2008:5)

# Emotional well-being and social competence

- The ability to cooperate, follow directions, as well as an age-appropriate awareness and knowledge of emotions, is necessary for successful social-emotional adjustment in Grade 1 (Barbarin et al. 2008:674).
- Regulating own emotions imply that the learner should be able to control aggressive behaviour, remain seated when expected to and not disrupt the learning process in the class (Bierman et al. 2008:1803).



# Approaches to learning

- Approaches to learning refers to learning-related behaviour that enables the learner to engage in classroom activities and includes motivation, a positive attitude towards learning and the ability to tolerate frustration (Vitiello, Greenfield, Munis & George, 2011:391), as well as curiosity, initiative and persistence (Barbarin et al. 2008:674).

# Cognitive skills and general knowledge

- Cognitive skills and general knowledge refer to age-appropriate reading, writing and numeracy skills as well as age-appropriate knowledge of the child's life world (Janus et al. 2010:383-384).
- The learner's academic knowledge depends on the quality of preschool instruction he/she was exposed to, as well as his/her ability to acquire new knowledge in the formal learning environment.

# Cognitive skills and general knowledge

- The executive functions each play an important role individually as well as collectively in the cognitive functioning of the learner.
- **I - Working memory** enables the learner to retrieve information from the long term memory, integrate it with newly acquired information and apply it in new situations.



# Cognitive skills and general knowledge

- **II - Inhibitory control** enables the learner to resist distractions and habits, in order to focus his/her attention on what is needed at a specific time and to control his/her own behaviour according to social expectations.
- **III - Cognitive flexibility** is the ability to adjust to changes in demands, to look at a problem from a different perspective and to think creatively.

# Language usage and communication skills

- Well-developed communication skills in the language of instruction, including a rich vocabulary and the ability to express thoughts fluently, as well as phonemic awareness and knowledge of literacy concepts are essential for successful learning in Grade 1 (Lessing & De Witt, 2005:245).
- This is the most important of all the criteria mentioned and the toughest barrier to overcome for many learners from disadvantaged backgrounds and second language learners.