

# **WILL GRADE 'R' REALLY IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF SOUTH AFRICAN EDUCATION?**

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## Acronyms

|        |  |
|--------|--|
| ABET   | Adult Basic Education & Training               |
| AS     | Assessment Standard                            |
| CEPD   | Center for Education Policy Development        |
| DAP    | Developmentally Appropriate Practice           |
| DBE    | Department of Basic Education                  |
| DOH    | Department of Health                           |
| EC     | Eastern Cape                                   |
| ECD    | Early Childhood Development                    |
| ELRU   | Early Learning Resource Unit                   |
| FASD   | Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders              |
| FET    | Further Education & Training                   |
| FFL    | Foundation for Learning                        |
| HEI    | Higher Education Institution                   |
| HODs   | Heads of Department                            |
| INSET  | In-service Education & Training                |
| LO     | Learning Outcome                               |
| LTSM   | Learner teacher support materials              |
| NCS    | National Curriculum Statement                  |
| NELDS  | National Early Learning Development Standards  |
| NGO    | Non-Governmental Organisation                  |
| NPDE   | National Professional Diploma in Education     |
| PRESET | Pre-service Education & Training               |
| SAIDE  | South African Institute for Distance Education |
| WC     | Western Cape                                   |
| WITS   | University of the Witwatersrand                |
| WSoE   | Wits School of Education                       |

## **Introduction**

This report is a record of the first seminar held in 2010 as part of a series of seminars hosted jointly by Umalusi (the Council for Quality Assurance in General and Further Education and Training), the Centre for Education Policy Development (CEPD) and the School of Education at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits). The series aims to focus debate on key aspects of the education system by bringing together different role-players.

The seminar topic was *Will Grade 'R' really improve the quality of SA education?* The seminar consisted of four speakers and a respondent. Lorayne Excell and Vivienne Linington, who are both based at the Wits School of Education, were the first speakers to present jointly on what the purpose of Grade R should be from a societal level, before considering what a good Grade R programme should involve from a pedagogical perspective. In addition, they went on to tackle the readiness of teachers to implement Grade R based on the research that they have conducted in Gauteng. Linda Biersteker, a researcher at the Early Learning Resource Unit (ELRU) focussed on the 0-5 year old age band in terms of whether these children are in fact ready for Grade R. The third presentation was made by Sheila Drew from the South African Institute for Distance Education (SAIDE). Her presentation looked specifically at the issue of available support for quality implementation of Grade R, with reference to teacher education and ongoing support within the education system as a whole. Finally Marie-Louise Samuels, from the Department of Basic Education, responded to the above speakers before the discussion was opened to the floor.

This report consists of papers presented as well as an overview of the comments made by the respondent and the discussion that followed.

## **Opening and Welcome**

Michele Berger welcomed everyone on behalf of CEPD to the seminar that is part of a series of discussions on improving education quality. She explained that the Wits School of Education has, this year, joined the partnership between CEPD and Umalusi and went on to thank Wits for hosting the event. The discussion on whether Grade R will improve the quality of South African education, she said, has come at an opportune time as the implementation of universal access to Grade R was supposed to have happened this year (2010), but has been delayed to allow for proper planning by the Department of Basic Education. Michele highlighted that Grade R is considered a priority for the Department of Basic Education as universal access to Grade R is part of the government's Medium Term Strategic Framework and she welcomed this. Finally, she expressed hope that the discussion that followed during the seminar would facilitate in helping the Department of Basic Education with its Grade R planning processes.

## Lorayne Excell & Vivien Linington (University of the Witwatersrand)

### Will Grade R really improve the quality of SA Education?

We would like to thank the organizers for this opportunity to be able to engage in a meaningful way with some pressing issues relating to the Grade R year. We often have the impression that Grade R is the 'forgotten child', the marginalized and neglected phase of formal education that is poorly understood as well as implemented. This is therefore a very welcome space in which to begin this engagement.

When this seminar was conceptualized it was suggested that we address three pertinent questions namely:

1. Readiness of the system (including legislation, funding and national and provincial guidelines)
2. Readiness of teachers (What should a Grade R teacher know and be able to do?; ECD practitioner training programmes leading on to Foundation Phase teacher education programmes; guidelines and tools for effective implementation in the classroom)
3. Readiness of children (the ECD continuum from 0-9 years).

However, we suggest that it would be useful to add another dimension – the opening of a rigorous debate about the kind of Grade R that is concomitant with the vision contained in the NCS and the Constitution. We should be engaging in debate with issues such as why do we need Grade R, what is it hoping to achieve and what kind of approach will allow us to achieve what we want? Debate around these questions needs to come before we consider what is involved in the readiness of the teacher, the child and the system. Ready for what, we must ask?

There are competing and contested ideas about the aim and purpose of Grade R as well as about what constitutes a high quality Grade R year. Our national understanding of the purpose of Grade R will obviously impact the approach adopted. And this approach, in turn, will determine the quality of the foundations laid for the citizens of tomorrow. We cannot effectively consider the link between Grade R and the quality of South African education until we have unpacked the arguments around the kind of Grade R that would best serve South Africa today.

So we will start to unpack this by opening the debate and asking what should be the aims of this year. We need, at the outset, to stress Grade R is in some way a homeless construct. It sits with one leg in the preschool and the other in the gateway to formal schooling. It is the first year of the foundation phase and at the same time the last year of the preschool phase. So from where does it draw its identity? This year should not be a 'watered down' Grade 1 but at the same time it needs to enable children to refine the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes that will stand them in good stead in formal schooling. One way to resolve this tension is to propose an approach that brings together some of the aims of preschool education while at the same time adopting an approach that meets some of the demands of the formal schooling system.

A starting point could be to consider the aims of Grade R through different lenses.

#### **Lens one: A preschool perspective**

The aims of preschool education vary but worldwide literature appears to endorse the following aims:

- ✓ Preparation for life and a foundation for lifelong learning
- ✓ Holistic development of the child
- ✓ Development of learning dispositions that will support lifelong learning and
- ✓ Preparation for Grade 1

### **Lens two: Preparation for Grade 1: an instrumentalist approach (Anning, 1991)**

This aim focuses predominately on the three Rs and foregrounds the teaching of the 'basics'. It is a more formal approach towards schooling and in many respects our research (Wits School of Education (WSoE), 2009) suggests that this has become the focus of the Grade R year. What we would see as the negative element in this perspective is that it does not take sufficient account of the first three aims mentioned in the preschool perspective.

We would suggest that we as a country should be striving to meet the first three aims. Why? Because, as research shows, if these aims are met children appear to be able to cope successfully in primary school – in other words, they have acquired the underpinning knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that will enable them to cope with the demands of a more structured education phase.

We as a country need to decide which aims we wish to follow because it is the aims that will determine every aspect of our approach to teaching and learning in the Grade R year.

### **Different approaches that could be adopted**

There are many different educational approaches but within Western culture three perspectives are being articulated as ways of viewing ECD/Grade R practice. We say ECD/Grade R because the current research (Riley, 2003; Bruce, 2004; Anning, Cullen and Fleer, 2009) is emphasizing that Grade R should not be a mini Grade 1. Rather, quality grade R practice should be more closely aligned with preschool pedagogy.

The three approaches to which we refer are:

1. A pedagogical approach informed by developmental psychology and which highlights developmental norms. This has become the dominant ECD model and informs what is commonly referred to as developmentally appropriate practice (DAP). However, in recent years, this model has been criticized by many contemporary early years' researchers (Grieshaber and Canella, 2001; Cannella and Viruru, 2004; MacNaughton, 2005). They argue that this approach could result in a deficit model which sees the child as having to achieve certain norms at a certain age and can result in an interpretation of the child's achievements which is narrow and lacks insight into the importance of context and conditions of possibility for teaching and learning. It supports, in other words, the notion of a universal child (ibid). We are not saying that developmental norms should be ignored but, as Walsh (2005) asserts, they are necessary but not sufficient. They need to be complemented with contemporary understanding of children's sociocultural contexts.
2. This leads us to a second alternative approach that takes into account sociocultural contexts and differing understandings of young children and how they best learn. This approach has recently been termed a historical sociocultural approach (Anning, Cullen and Fleer, 2009) and draws heavily on Vygotskyian and neo-Vygotskyian theory and poststructural, feminist, and

postcolonial theories as well as critical theory. This approach is, we would argue, particularly relevant to South Africa because it takes cognizance of a wide range of sociocultural and economic contexts. It also highlights the importance of the teacher as the co-constructor of knowledge. It thus follows that in implementing this approach teachers must have a wide knowledge base so that their mediation can touch on deep, meaningful and relevant issues in relation to South Africa's vision of democracy as set out in the Constitution and National Curriculum Statement (NCS) (DoE, 2002). There is a pivotal role for the teacher as mediator of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values in both teacher-guided activities and play.

Approaches 1 and 2 emphasize the importance of play in early learning albeit from different perspectives. Both perspectives however, require that the teacher has a deep understanding of play as a purposeful and stimulating activity.

3. The third approach is one that our research (WSoE, 2009) and research elsewhere (Anning, 1991) has shown is persistently pervasive but not essentially pedagogically sound as an approach towards early years teaching. This is an approach that, in the main, focuses on 'academics,' i.e. reading, writing and arithmetic and tries to establish numeracy and literacy through more didactic practice which favours table top activities such as worksheets and other largely 'inactive' activities. In our view, it does not take sufficient cognizance of how young children learn. In learning, the internalization of concepts is facilitated by a three learning phases; children first experience these concepts kinaesthetically (i.e. through movement), then three dimensionally (through exploring with concrete apparatus) and only then through pen and paper activities.

The more didactic approach has, in all probability, been influenced by an incomplete understanding by practitioners of the developmental approach. Practitioners are not necessarily accepting of the didactic approach but faced with parental, school and educational policy demands (for example, the implementation of assessment policy) and, in a number of cases, their own lack of deep understanding of how best to enhance children's learning, practitioners feel pressurized to implement this more formal approach.

Each of the approaches we have outlined will necessitate something different from the system, the teacher and the child. So, as we stated in the beginning, we need to enter into a robust debate around the type of ECD/Grade R approach that should be adopted. From current research worldwide (Anning, Cullen and Fler, 2009; Yelland, 2005; Mac Naughton, 2003; Siraj-Blatchford, 2000), it is evident that an approach which embraces diversity, including the various sociocultural contexts of all stakeholders and highlights the importance of play is advisable. Such an approach which also emphasizes the role of the teacher as a mediator of learning would then constitute effective or high quality pedagogy in early years learning and teaching.

A further consideration that should form an integral part of a high quality programme is the mediation of 'reasonableness' (Burbules, 1994). We would like to introduce 'reasonableness' as a learning disposition that would support lifelong learning (see page two). By reasonableness we are referring to those attributes of character that begin to develop in early childhood. Or maybe don't develop because of a wide range of socialization, pedagogical and other factors. In using the term 'reasonableness', we are referring to a child's ability to give reasons for their opinions. To, unconsciously perhaps, counter bias and prejudice through responsive listening – listening and responding to the ideas of others, adults and children, and starting to listen to themselves. Story books and other stimuli are used to generate

responsive listening and collaborative enquiry (thinking together) as children step back from self and reflect on what they are saying and how they are saying it.

The question that must now be asked is what kind of practitioner is required to implement the high quality approach of which we have spoken. We would suggest that this approach requires a practitioner who is capable, confident and well informed about holistic child development. Furthermore s/he is aware of and able to accommodate children coming from varied economic and sociocultural contexts and has a deep understanding of what constitutes high quality Grade R practice.

To answer the question, are our practitioners ready for such a system we would have to say no – not the majority.

### **Why do we say this?**

As our research (WSoE, 2009) has shown, many Grade R practitioners in Gauteng are under-qualified, lack status and have insufficient support from school management teams, school principals and HoDs. The lack of support comes, we found, from a general limited understanding of the unique requirements of Grade R and the fact that it should not be a 'watered down' Grade 1. Even the practitioners themselves, it was found, have a limited understanding of high quality practice. They lack sufficient insight and layered understanding of appropriate practice as well as the impact of contextual factors. Furthermore, their understanding of the range of possibilities in relation to rich language usage as well as the optimization of learning and teaching support materials (LTSM) and assessment is limited. There is also evidence of minimal understanding of how to implement meaningful play that can enhance learning both in and outdoors. A good Grade R practitioner knows when to mediate in the context of play and when to stand back. Mediation used effectively allows the maximization of teachable moments that occur spontaneously in the Grade R day. Practitioners also pay insufficient attention to opportunities for the implicit and explicit promotion of values inherent in the NCS, for example, respect.

In summary, if the above aspects are not met it results in a narrow interpretation of the NCS where, at best, the NCS is used as a prescriptive tool to lay the foundations for the three Rs – reading, writing and arithmetic - without taking sufficient cognizance of the other learning areas as well as the fourth R 'reasonableness' the learning disposition to which we have already referred.

To counter narrow interpretations of the NCS our research (WSoE, 2009) concluded we need a teacher who can:

- Demonstrate an understanding of how children learn.
- Create an appropriate early learning environment.
- Be sensitive to contextual and other factors.
- Implement an appropriate and purposeful play-based Grade R programme.
- Use teacher-guided activities to generate enquiry and the co-construction of knowledge.
- Align developmental domains with the NCS LOs and ASs to guide professional practice.
- Implement appropriate assessment strategies.
- Focus on issues relating to diversity and social justice.
- Mediate learning and reflect on their practice.

In conclusion, this seminar asked us to consider the question "Will Grade R really improve the quality of SA Education?" Our answer is no, unless thought - and action emanating from this – is given to the type

of Grade R that we in South Africa need. We would argue that Grade R can and should be conceptualised in ways other than those currently being implemented. And that this can be done within the framework of the NCS and the vision of citizenship contained in this. This document could be seen to underpin a high quality play-based approach that is sensitive to contextual and other factors but this takes a particular interpretation of the NCS and, this needs to be mediated to all concerned if such an approach is to be implemented competently and confidently.

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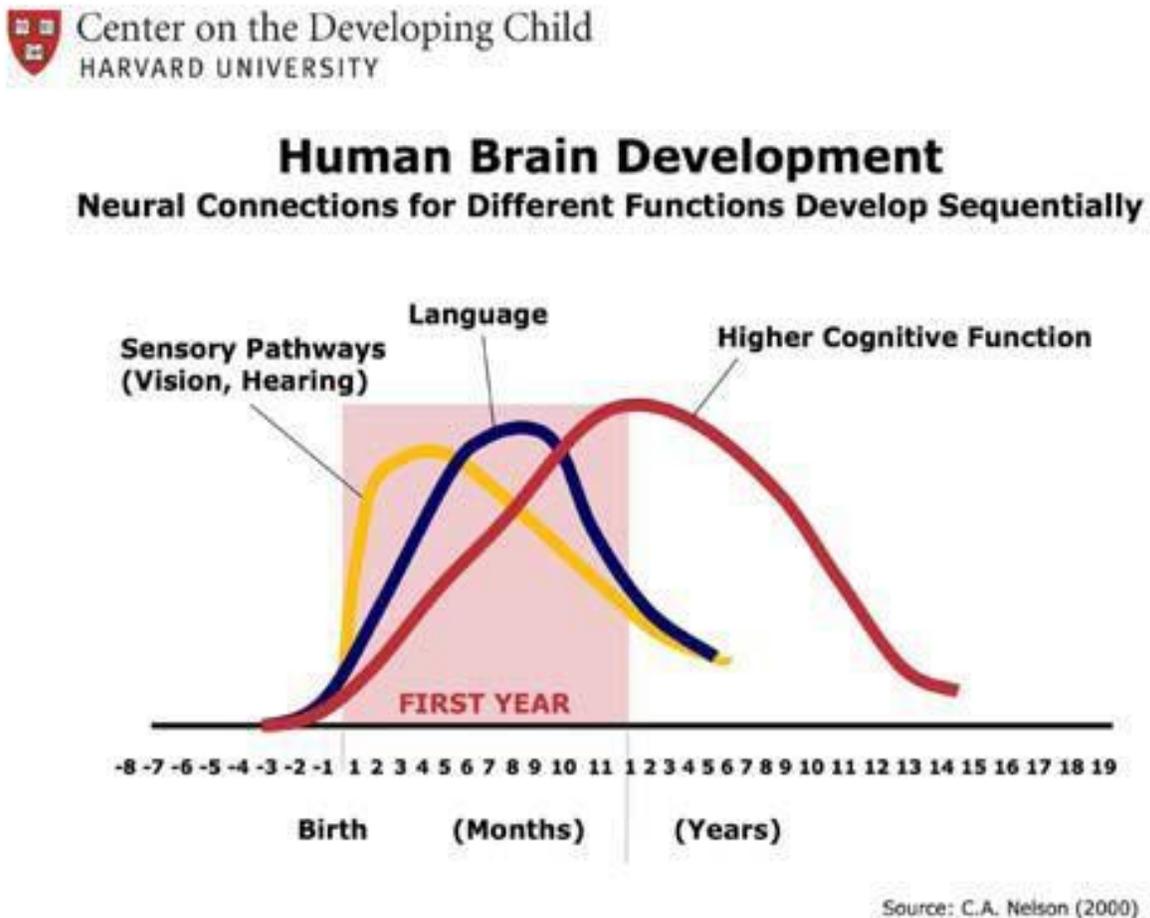
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## Linda Biersteker (Early Learning Resource Unit)

### How ready are our children for Grade R?

The early years are a particularly sensitive period. Brain and biological development in the early years is experience-based, leading to neurophysiological pathways being laid down in synaptic formations in the brain. These establish the foundation for emotional, language, motor and cognitive competencies. The quality of sensitivity provided in early relationships with carers is integral to this process. As Figure 1 illustrates different functions develop sequentially and pre-birth to three years are especially critical.

Figure 1: Pre-birth to four: the roots of readiness



Young children's development depends on the interaction of a number of factors including both personal and structural features. Personal factors include their genetic makeup, prenatal influences, their temperament and the way they interact with the world, and how their health, nutrition and psychosocial needs are met by their caregivers. Structural factors include demographic and household structures.

The 2007 Lancet series identifies malnutrition, iodine and iron deficiency and inadequate stimulation as the major risks to development.

Figure 2: Evidence: risks & pathways for ECD outcomes

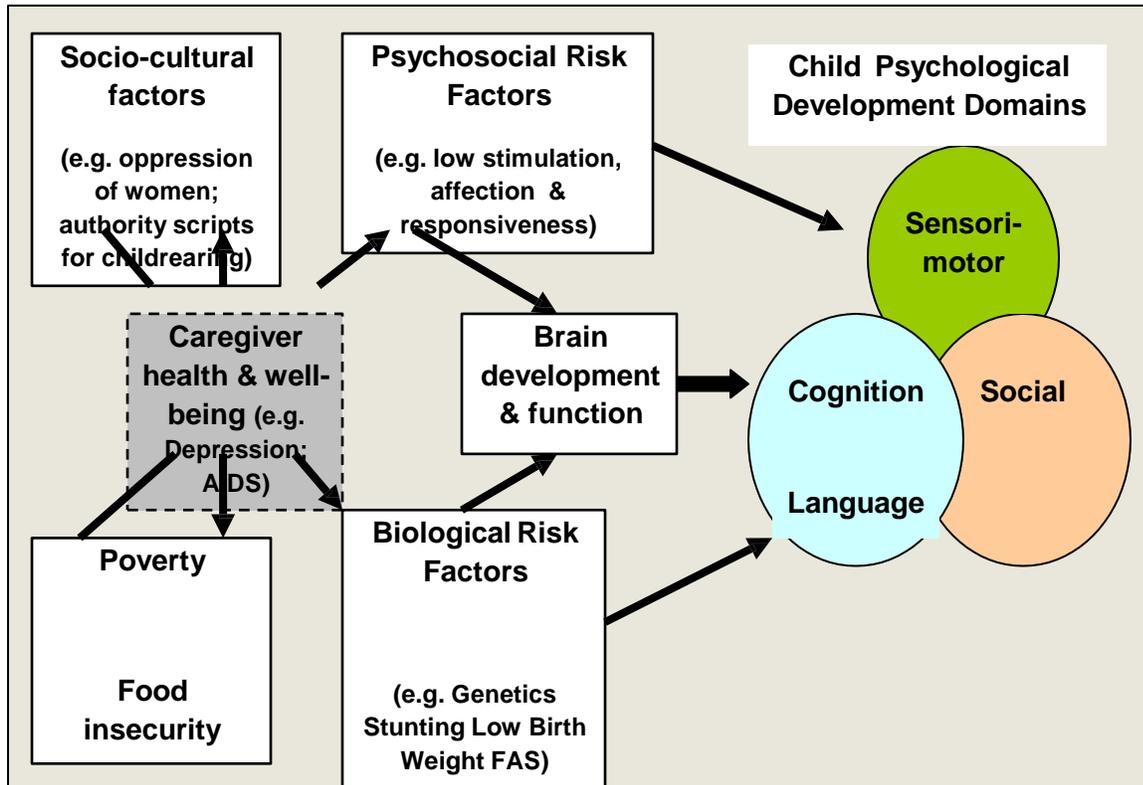


Figure 2 illustrates the manner in which risks to early development operate is illustrated in Figure 1 below and has been adapted from Walker et al (2007) ( Daves and Biersteker, 2009)

For very young children, because of their dependence on their caregivers, home influences are most significant for their well-being (e.g. Richter, 2004). Of key importance are the cultural expectations for development and methods of child-rearing which influence the manner in which all aspects of early child development unfold (Miller & Goodnow, 1995; Nsamenang, 2008). Children’s active participation in activities on their own, with caregivers and other adults and with peers shapes motor cognitive, language and socio-emotional development postnatally, building on biological sources of development (Miller et al., 1995). The quality of these engagements depends not only on the activity partners available to the child, but also on the materials available to children for play and experimentation.

Nutritional status impacts significantly on child health and well being. Stunting is associated with developmental delay and is the strongest predictor of childhood mortality in children under the age of five.

Caregiver knowledge, capacity, warmth and availability can improve development outcomes in difficult circumstances while a lack of consistent caregiving and stimulation can both increase vulnerability to disease and lead to long-term cognitive and psychosocial damage (Dunn, 2005 and Richter, 2004). The

capacity of caregivers for caring is subject to a number of factors, including household income, household structure and maternal health – mental and physical. Where carers lack support, are too old or young, are ill or subject to violence and abuse or dealing with very demanding care situations, they may not be in a position to provide for the needs of young children. Long-term deep poverty is a particular risk factor for children.

While many environmental variables affect young children's development, it is the existence of multiple risk factors that is of major concern. A combination of risk factors reliably predicts poor outcomes for children (Sameroff, 2005). Conversely where there are promotive factors in the care environment, children in difficult circumstances may do substantially better than their peers.

## The Situation

### Situation of under 5s in SA

- Population under 5: 5 068 900 (SSA 2009)
- Infant mortality rate 45 per 1,000 (RSA 2009)
- Child mortality rate 68 per 1000 in 2003 (ASSA 2003)
- Nutritional status: 9% Low birth weight; 23% under four stunted and 11% underweight (Kruger et al, 2007)
- Disability – estimated 3 % (Schneider & Saloojee, 2007). FASD and HIV related developmental delays (Potterton, 2006)

Many South African children arrive in Grade R with their developmental potential significantly compromised. As a result are unlikely to be able to benefit much from what are often under-resourced educational settings.

Nutritional status is a serious concern in South Africa where the most recent national survey indicates that eighteen percent of children under nine years are stunted and almost ten percent are underweight. Children under four are most affected with twenty three per cent stunted and eleven per cent underweight. (Kruger et al, 2007). Close to nine percent (8.9%) of children have low birth weight status which is associated with compromised nutritional status later on (District Health Information System 2007).

While about 3% of under 5s are estimated to have moderate to severe disability, a significant proportion of infants with HIV infection show early and marked cognitive and motor delays. These abnormalities are independent of other risk factors for developmental delay (Chase et al 2000). A Gauteng study (Potterton, 2006) of a sample of 122 HIV positive children found that half the children had severely delayed mental development and almost three quarters had severely delayed motor development. Less than 25% of the children had normal mental development scores. Parents (mothers) had clinically significant levels of stress.

Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD), associated with heavy episodic drinking by pregnant women, is a serious problem in South Africa. Prevalence studies in high risk areas of South Africa have shown that some of these areas have the highest rate of FASD in the world (up to 119/1000 in one high risk area) (May et al. 2007).

- Poverty 66% under 5s (Streak et al 2008).
- Caregiver characteristics
  - Education levels – 74% of women completed primary school (RSA 2009)
  - Maternal health – HIV (19.7% women 15 to 49 yrs), high TB rates (RSA 2009)
  - Maternal depression appears to be significant in mothers living in poverty (Tomlinson et al 2009)

The most important risk to sound development is the broad impact of poverty environments with associated malnutrition, HIV and AIDS (in both caregivers and young children), neglect and maltreatment, and an early environment that fails to provide the majority of children with the necessary learning and stimulation to prepare the child for school.

Primary carer (maternal) education is significantly associated with positive child outcomes and in South Africa three quarters of women have completed primary schooling and are classified as functionally literate. With older women usually grandmothers caring for young children on a wide scale many of these are likely to be found in the proportion that have lower education.

Low sensitivity and maternal depressive symptoms are negatively associated with infant development. A South Africa study indicates that *maternal depression* may be a significant problem among young mothers living in poverty in this country (Tomlinson, Cooper, Stein, Swartz, & Molteno, 2006).

### **Policy**

From the beginnings of ECD policy development for a democratic South Africa, it has been recognised that “bringing five year olds into the formal education system is understood to be an essential part of

upgrading ECD. Nonetheless if this was the sole focus of state input into ECD it would be too little too late for the majority of young children” (CEPD/World Bank, 1994). Policies and legislation has taken a broad and holistic view of ECD service needs including the 1995 Education and Training White Paper, White Paper 5 (2001), and the Children’s Act of 2005 (as amended) with a focus on a range of ECD programmes, prevention and early intervention. The National Integrated Plan for Early Childhood Development 2005 - 2010 identifies a package of services for young children – health and nutrition, access to grants, psychosocial support and early stimulation. In particular it recognises that the primary site of intervention is the home and that a range of programmes will be needed to reach all children especially the majority who are poor and vulnerable.

### Services and Supports

Implementation of the National Integrated Plan is a challenge; not least because of its huge target of 2.5 to 3 million poor children, multiple delivery sites and commitment to service integration which requires the drawing together of different departments and role players.

## Services and supports

- Births attended by skilled personnel 92% (DoH, 2008)
- Immunisation coverage 88% (RSA 2009)
- Social grants 68% 0 – 9 years revised means test (SASSA, July 2009)
- Access to early childhood stimulation/ education programmes
  - Centres 22.6% (SSA 2007)
- 13 736 Registered sites(646 491 children )
- 411 203 subsidised children
  - Home and community based increasing but numbers unknown.

Indications are that most young children access the health system. Primary Health Care facility utilisation suggests national utilisation of 4.5 visits per child under 5 annually, mostly in the first year (Salojee & Bamford 2006). However there are concerns that service quality is not optimal, largely due to the pressure on the primary health care system of staffing shortages and the burden of providing treatment as well as preventive services in the context of increasing HIV and TB.

The poverty targeted child support grant has rolled-out rapidly since its inception. Current research indicates a positive impact of this non-conditional grant on household food expenditure and on crèche or preschool attendance (Delany et al. 2008).

Centre-based (formal) services are the prevalent form of provision and serve about 20% of children under 5-years-old. The vast majority of these are private or community run and there is significant variation in terms of access and quality levels. While it is a statutory requirement many sites are not yet registered, and poverty targeted subsidies reach about 13% of the total population of poor children. The educational and other programme aspects of these services vary. Anecdotal and forthcoming research indicate that quality on the whole is not high, particularly with regard to the stimulation aspects.

Home and community based ECD focusing on primary carers is an emerging form of provision hampered so far by the lack of a clear funding stream. There is no South African evidence as yet as to how these may impact on child cognitive outcomes.

To summarise, access to good quality ECD stimulation services for pre Grade R children delivered in a variety of settings via different programme modalities is very limited at present.

## Conclusion

### How ready?

- While there are serious quality challenges for Grade R, given the multiple risk factors outlined, it is likely that most of our 5 year olds enter Grade R at a disadvantage.
- Improving schooling results depends on strengthening inputs much earlier on, with a focus on maternal health and education and adequate nutrition.

As we grapple with our extremely poor education outcomes, solutions within the education system can only address part of the problem. (A study tracking literacy levels from Grades R to 3 found that language delays remained stable across this period (Klop 2005) suggesting that the education received was not powerful enough to make a significant difference to an already entrenched problem). ECD policy and programming approaches recognise the complexity of the problem and the holistic inputs that are needed to fix it.

It is therefore curious that solutions to the systemic evaluation results bring only education and especially maths and science under the spotlight. We need to remind ourselves that schooling outcomes depend on a host of factors and the outcomes data should be cross referenced to other predictive factors that could be easily measured, such as stunting and disability in particular. Relatively simple interventions in the pre-birth to three year age range including maternal and child health and nutrition alone have the potential to make a substantial difference, while at the same time parental education and community and formal ECD facilities receive the attention needed to provide solid and appropriate stimulation.

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## Sheila Drew (South African Institute for Distance Education)

### Will Grade R improve South African Education?

This is a report on aspects of a Grade R project funded by Zenex.

#### What good will Grade R do?

Imagine a group of 57 young children, toddlers and babies sitting in a garage on the floor all morning, being watched by a woman sitting on a stool – what good will Grade R do?

Imagine a Grade R class with 4 and 5 year old children sitting in desks reciting a, e, i, o, u with a teacher holding a stick. What good will Grade R do?

Imagine a Grade R class in which there is a range of freely available outside and inside activities for children to play with, where the children are told and read stories on a daily basis and the teacher loves her job. What good will Grade R do?

Imagine a Grade 1 class with 6 and 7 year old children sitting in desks reciting a, e, i, o, u with a teacher holding a stick. What good will Grade R do?

We can carry on imagining many different situations, including one in which the so-called Grade R children are in an integrated pre-school with children from 2-6.

The point is that perhaps it is not so much about Grade R as about what happens there ...

#### Quality Grade R

For this presentation we would like to single out three recent research reports:

1. Eastern Cape Department of Education, *Evaluation of the Accredited Training of Early Childhood Development Practitioners, Year One: of a three year cycle of research, Baseline study: Quality of Teaching and Learning in Grade R, 2008*
2. Gauteng Department of Education Directorate: *Curriculum Development – GET, Implementation of the National Curriculum Statement in the Foundation Phase, March 2009, Wits School of Education.*
3. National Treasury of Republic of South Africa, Technical Assistance Unit, *TAU ECD Grade R diagnostic Project: Consolidated Report and Recommendations, December 2008.*

Our interpretation of those reports, and the conversations we facilitated and inputs we received through this project, was about quality.

For example, in the National Treasury research report it is argued that

There is much confusion as to what quality Grade R entails. It is vitally important that the DoE sets out clearly what a quality grade R class is, including being explicit about the importance of structured play for this age group, the expected methodologies to achieve Grade R learning outcomes, and a number of measures and indicators that can be used to judge the quality of

provision. Without such clarity it is likely that the focus will continue to be on numerical targets ... Unfortunately, these ... do not equate to quality (National Treasury, 2008, page 11).

This view is supported by the Eastern Cape research which says that:

The province has increased access to Reception Year. The quality of the classrooms and of the educational programmes, however, may generally be harmful to the wellbeing of children. This raises concerns about the readiness of schools to incorporate children into the Reception Year. (Eastern Cape Department of Education, 2008, page 9)

The report also concludes that:

The quality of learning and teaching in 250 Reception Year classrooms, however, has been found to be exceptionally low. Fully competent ECD programmes (according to the NCS for Reception Year and the Level 4 ECD practitioner outcomes) exist in only about twelve schools of the two hundred and fifty which were visited in this first cycle of research. (page 97)

And that:

The Department of Education must now focus upon the quality of the Reception Year programme within the quality of the Foundation Phase programme. (Eastern Cape Department of Education, 2009, page 92)

A Western Cape participant in this research summed up her opinion of what needs to be done to improve implementation by saying "We need better qualified teachers who are registered and properly paid, and who have a pride for their profession."

### **What does quality Grade R mean?**

There have been attempts to understand what quality Grade R means, e.g. in the departmental guidelines for costing a package, and the Department of Social Development guidelines from 2006, and to some extent in other national department documents, but this needs to be consolidated. One of the questions raised in the conversations we had was 'Should Grade R be strictly incorporated into formal schooling, and therefore have the same curriculum components as Grade 1, or should it be seen as a bridge into formal schooling from home and/or preschooling, with more emphasis on the role it plays in facilitating continued childhood development on the 0-9 continuum?' Most conclusions tended towards the latter, with a strong emphasis on the role of play.

### **Target Audience**

Part of understanding quality is knowing who the target audience is:

- The target children for Grade R are mostly children who will not have attended pre-school before they go to Grade R.
- Historically many of the ECD practitioners are women who do not have Grade 12, but who have completed either the ECD Level 4 and/or the ECD Level 5. Some of these have gone on to teach Grade R. The Draft Findings of the HSRC Teacher Qualifications Survey (TQS) (DoE, 2009d),

commissioned by the DoE, provide some interesting insights into the qualification status of Grade R teachers. The survey was of a statistically significant sample of schools nationally. 7380 serving teachers in 580 public schools completed survey questionnaires. In the sample there were 374 Grade R teachers, of which only 42% have a professional teaching qualification. Of the 42% with recognised professional qualifications such as a Teacher's Diploma or NPDE, only 12% have a specialisation in pre-primary teaching. Less than 5% of the professionally unqualified Grade R teachers (i.e. the other 48%) have ECD/ABET qualifications. Those who are qualified mostly have the old teaching diploma, rather than a qualification from a HEI.

One implication of the children target audience is that quality is even more crucial because this will be those children's first school experience.

An implication of target audience for teacher education is that there needs to be quality across the sector of NGOs, FETs and HEIs, and all the way up from Level 2 in vocational and FET to Level 7 in higher education, and in INSET and PRESET contexts.

It also implies that there needs to be collaboration in order to achieve quality. Without collaboration we will not have proper progression, there will be inconsistencies in the type of Grade R teacher we get, and therefore the kind of programmes we put teachers through.

The nature of the target audience also impacts on the other quality issues that we want to highlight, namely content and ongoing support.

### **Content**

In our full report, we suggest that programmes be reviewed in relation to whether certain content is adequately and appropriately covered. In addition, we suggest a common core standard content for teacher education programmes, including:

- Fundamentals at level 4 and 5 need to be more carefully considered. We believe they are critical in preparing teachers for facilitating emergent literacy and numeracy, as well as preparing teachers for their own further studies. We are aware of a pilot towards national foundational learning.
- Level 5 and 6 programmes - teachers' language and academic literacy built in.
- Critical understanding of NELDS and NCS
- A level of language required to be a teacher, including an additional language;
- African language emergent literacy instruction and second language / multilingual emergent literacy instruction;
- Teacher agency, values in education;
- Community development / psycho-social support

Given the continuum on which this teacher education needs to happen consideration should be given to including these core competencies in 0-4 and Foundation Phase programmes too.

### **Ongoing support**

Finally we want to highlight the quality of support that a grade R teacher receives.

We all know that student teachers require support during initial training. Support needs to be provided at a number of levels, including academic literacy, support during teaching practice etc. This is a whole area on its own.

We also know that many Grade R teachers are serving and are underqualified. We believe that the focus should be on providing ongoing support to serving teachers. There are a number of challenges:

- There have been attempts to provide support materials for teachers, most notably in EC and WC and through the FFL. We believe that the resources need to be supplemented, deepened and made more accessible. In particular, there was some debate in project conversations and inputs about the value of providing prescriptive materials, particularly lesson plans.
  - One of the limitations of prescriptive lesson plans is that they simply cannot cover all the needs of children, and all the diverse ways in which those needs can be met. This can only be done by a teacher who is competent at observing the children, identifying the needs of all her children, and planning accordingly.
  - Secondly, what kind of lesson plans do we really need for Grade R teachers? We have suggested in this report that we do not need to have lesson plans that adhere strictly to the NCS in a formalised schooling sense, since Grade R should not be just another Grade 1. During discussions it was suggested that Grade R lesson plans should serve as exemplars, and should not be stand alone. They should be accompanied by carefully constructed, clear and understandable teacher guidance that tries to answer ‘what if ...’ questions about the lesson plans.
  - This is related to another feeling that was strongly expressed by many participants, that the use of work books in Grade R should be limited, and that teachers should be helped to understand the limitations and appropriate use of worksheets, in certain circumstances.
- The second challenge in providing ongoing support is capacity. According the National Treasury Report  
“Adding Grade R to the existing responsibilities of people with no previous knowledge of Grade R, and limited understanding of what it entails, is viewed as a problematic approach” (National Treasury, 2008, page 6).
- A third challenge is that we need to build into support a quality process of monitoring and evaluation:  
“A key challenge in monitoring and evaluation of Grade R is having agreed on quality criteria and systematic reporting within a detailed strategy and plan in each province.” (National Treasury, 2008, page 9)

The solutions are collaborative. There is a range of support materials out there that can be adapted and organised in ways that are more supportive than currently. There are people who have experience in providing on-site support most notably from NGOs. They need to be drawn in to a systematised support programme working with government facilitators.

### **Holistic support**

We want to stress that quality support materials will only be useful if they are developed against some idea of what quality in Grade R means. In our view, they also need to be developed in line with other curriculum design and content recommendations that have been made, and that in this way they contribute to the future development of quality components of teacher education programmes. Even

so, we doubt that these materials alone will make a real difference in the classroom unless they are facilitated by district Grade R facilitators and field workers in a quality process. So it is about looking at quality at all levels not just in isolated pockets.

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National Treasury of Republic of South Africa, Technical Assistance Unit, *TAU ECD Grade R diagnostic Project: Consolidated Report and Recommendations*, December 2008.

## Respondent: Marie-Louise Samuels (Department of Basic Education)

The respondent was Marie-Louise Samuels, the Acting Chief Director for Curriculum and Assessment in the Department of Basic Education. She stated that although it was difficult to prepare a response prior to the seminar, she had correctly anticipated the kinds of issues that people were going to raise. Nevertheless, she did not want her presentation to be viewed merely as a defensive response to the issues raised. Marie-Louise went on to say that much of what had been said can be found in various documents written by the Department of Education. She suggested that rather than ask whether Grade R is going to improve the quality of SA education, the question to ask should be *'What would assist in terms of improving the quality of SA education?'*

Marie-Louise urged against the quality of our education system being judged on the basis of a single grade such as Grade R. She explained, for example, that it was already known from the systemic evaluation results that learners perform better at Grade 3 than they do at Grade 6, and so, she asked, "Can we then say Grade 3 is contributing something to the poorer results obtained in Grade 6?" Thus, the notion of focusing on one grade (in this case Grade R) is opportunistic because this grade is new in the system and does not have qualified teachers. Also, she argued that the quality of education is not any better in other grades and that many of the challenges faced at Grade R are similar to those experienced in other grades. Thus, simply put, Grade R cannot on its own turn the education system around with respect to increasing quality.

For Marie-Louise, we are at a very interesting time in South Africa where we are able to judge our education system not just on the basis of Matric results, but also via Grade 3, 6 and 9 systemic evaluation results and, if all goes well, Grade R indicators. She critiqued the presentations for being one-sided in the sense that they only focussed on the shortcomings of Grade R in the classroom. For example, good practice, although limited, does exist at Grade R level. The important thing to do, she said, is to increase access to and improve the quality of education, and it is clear that Grade R has enabled increased access to education. The challenge however remains the need to boost quality. Marie-Louise commended Linda Biersteker for highlighting other factors, in addition to teaching practice, contributing to quality learning, such as the importance of nutrition, health and stimulation even prior to birth.

When one thinks about readiness to implement Grade R, Marie-Louise explained that there are parts of the education system that are ready. Likewise, there are some teachers and some learners that are ready. On teacher readiness, she said that those who are ready to teach Grade R mostly come from the privileged backgrounds. Despite such readiness, she questioned whether teachers who are qualified are in fact offering a quality service. Moreover, having a qualification is not the only determinant for teachers to do things that are expected of them; there are other factors such as designing effective learning programmes, using appropriate teaching and learning methodologies, and so forth, all of which require high competence levels.

Marie-Louise went on to speak about institutional readiness, whereby readiness is also about higher education institutions (HEIs) in the country being ready to take on the training of foundation phase teachers, including Grade R, and in the African languages. She highlighted the failure of HEIs to attract African teachers into the African languages and suggested that HEIs are also not offering the necessary qualifications that enable graduates to provide a quality Grade R programme in the different African

languages. For Marie-Louise, the readiness of the teachers, learners and departments needs to be linked to the readiness of higher education institutions.

Marie-Louise indicated that she did not believe that NGOs have the capacity to offer training that includes theoretical frameworks that teachers require. Similarly, she felt that higher education institutions do not have the capacity to offer the range of methodologies that NGOs can offer. Therefore, HEIs and NGOs need to collaborate with one another to offer a quality service, in the same way that government departments need to work with one another.

Marie-Louise explained that there is very little the Department of Basic Education can do about the choice of language used at schools. Most materials available for student support in schools are in English and Afrikaans. Thus, schools are more supportive to children who speak these languages at home. In the African languages there are limited learning materials available, so many parents choose English and Afrikaans as the language of choice for their children. While English and Afrikaans materials are available in all grades up to Grade 12, materials for many of the African languages are only available up to Grade 4. According to her, “the challenge is that we are always going to think that English and Afrikaans speaking children (whose home language is English or Afrikaans) are cleverer as they are being supported by available materials in these languages.”

Marie-Louise concluded her presentation by reminding everyone that the conversation about Grade R was started a long time ago and that it has to keep going. In responding to whether Grade R can improve the quality of South African education, she reiterated that “a child’s ability to learn well is influenced by many factors; at home, in the community and at school,” as quoted from a Systemic Evaluation Report. In other words, the Grade R classroom is only one factor influencing the quality of the complete learning process.

## Discussion Session

### Comments:

Various comments emerged during the discussion session with most focussing on qualifications and language-related issues. A representative from the South African Qualifications Authority said that he would be delighted to see qualified grade R teachers and he challenged institutions of higher education to design programmes for these teachers that are specific to particular grades. He also challenged the DBE to construct a database for the Grade R sector. For example, there is currently no indication of the actual size of the sector, training needs, etc. The Department needs to clarify how they train, re-skill and pay practitioners especially since many Grade R teachers are paid stipends as opposed to salaries. Another challenge was directed at the organizers of the seminar that there is need for broader forum to discuss issues of this nature, followed by a plan of action to address these issues. He indicated that most of the presenters had conducted quantitative studies and there were no tracer studies to suggest that Grade R really does affect lifelong learning.

A representative from the Molteno Institute for Language and Literacy commented that last year they had conducted literacy interventions in 48 Grade 1 classes in rural areas of Limpopo, Mpumalanga and Northwest. Learners were tested before and after the literacy interventions and what they found was that children who had been through Grade R performed better than those who had not, even though quality levels varied. She summed up with the comment that "Some Grade R is better than no Grade R."

The issue of language, with regard to schools being provided with suitable materials in the various African languages as well as learner and teacher development, emerged as a key issue in the discussion. Another representative from the Molteno Institute for Language and Literacy criticised the Department's recent intervention to supply materials to schools. Her concern was that there is no point in spending so much on materials that teachers do not know how to use. In addition, she questioned the use of expensive resource kits that are in English or were simply translated and not adequately adapted, making these materials meaningless. In most cases the teacher speaks an African language that is different to that of the learners. She asked what the solution to our language crisis is and how to make the best choices in the types of classrooms that we have in South Africa? She explained that English has become the easiest way out since it is most people's second language. Finally, she highlighted the use of unsound translations of materials and other policy documents from English into African languages and questioned why there is no research on the development of materials in African languages: "Where the materials are available, they are not translated well from English or the translation is done without research and consultation."

A member of the Gauteng Education Portfolio Committee indicated that language is an important instrument and that children always go back to their first language when seeking solutions to problems, hence the need to ensure that they are competent in their home languages. She attributed the high maths failure rate to the subject being taught in English. In order for children to understand English effectively, they must first be competent in their home languages. Educators should recognise this and help children to learn in their home language. She used the example of Afrikaans which was developed in such a way that it became a language through which people could effectively express themselves in all subjects. She suggested that all public servants (including teachers) learn an African language.

A representative from the Human Rights and Education Centre, called for increased scholarship in African languages, via increased collaboration between HEIs and local communities. She gave the example of being unable to write her PhD proposal in siSwati because there are no siSwati-speaking supervisors.

A representative from North West University (Potchefstroom Campus) indicated that her institution had started to offer some courses in African languages such as Setswana in 2009. Likewise, a University of Johannesburg representative explained that the Foundation Phase teacher training programme at the University of Johannesburg had started in Afrikaans, Sotho, Zulu and English at the beginning of the 2010 academic year.

Finally, with respect to teaching and learning methodologies, a lecturer in maths education at Wits highlighted that although structured play in Grade R is important, formal learning processes, particularly with regard to mathematics, are equally important. The question should therefore be: “How do we get the two conversations (or approaches to learning) to talk to one another?”

### **Responses:**

On the issue of qualifications, Lorayne Excell responded by saying that from a higher education perspective, the question is always what further qualifications can be offered which aren't in the Norms and Standards. She disagreed with Grade R being placed as part of the Foundation Phase programme. From her experience, teachers found it difficult asking questions that extended children's understanding. This is partly due to a lack of content understanding amongst teachers. Marie-Louise Samuels indicated that she has yet to see a qualification for a single grade. Rather, she referred to the importance of identifying overall competencies needed within the entire foundation phase. Marie-Louise pointed out that there is currently no unique training strategy for Grade R and information on Grade R training requirements can be found in the overall teacher development strategy.

Regarding the need for a Grade R database outlining things such as teacher training needs, Marie-Louise explained that it is difficult to focus solely on Grade R within the broader education system. Since 2004 Grade R has been treated as part of the whole education system. Thus, information pertaining specifically to Grade R can be found within the broader education database. She emphasised that Grade R will remain part of the school system and that we need to find ways to best deal with it within the broader schooling system.

On the issue of African languages, Marie-Louise stated that all education documents go through rigorous translation processes carried out by accredited service providers. Questions pertaining to the quality of these translations reflect badly on these service providers and may mean that we are facing a language crisis in this country. Although we know that some schools are not going to use the materials (Grade R Packs) or are going to use them inappropriately, there has been an overwhelming response from schools saying that they were grateful for receiving these packs. In the end it's all about what teachers do with what they have got, a bad book in a good teacher's hand can become a good resource for teaching. Marie-Louise recommended that we look at the positive things that are working in the education system and build on these.

### **Closure & Thanks: Ruksana Osman (Wits)**

The seminar was officially closed by the Head of the Wits School of Education, Professor Ruksana Osman, who thanked everyone for their participation.