

# Grade R teachers' understanding of reflective practice

**Authors:**

Ailsa S. Connelly<sup>1</sup>   
Naseema Shaik<sup>1</sup>   
Cina Mosito<sup>1</sup> 

**Affiliations:**

<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Education, Cape Peninsula University of Technology, Cape Town, South Africa

**Corresponding author:**

Ailsa Connelly,  
asconnelly@gmail.com

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**Background:** Internationally and nationally, reflective practice is suggested as a tool to inform quality teaching and learning. In South Africa, the quality of education is in the spotlight as schoolgoing children continue to perform poorly. This article investigates reflective practice in Grade R teaching. It explores teachers' understanding of reflective practice to inform their practice to support learners having a positive first year of formal schooling.

**Aim:** The aim of this study was investigate the knowledge and understanding of Grade R teachers about reflective practice.

**Setting:** Two Grade R teachers in one school in the Southern Suburbs of Cape Town participated in the study.

**Methods:** An interpretivist case study using semi-structured interviews and document analysis informed the findings. Thematic analysis revealed common themes to explore the knowledge and understanding of Grade R teachers regarding reflective practice.

**Results:** The teachers interviewed demonstrated a tacit understanding of reflective practice. They described it as an innate aspect of their teaching. Their knowledge and understanding are theoretical and there is no evidence of reflective practice in the documents used to inform their teaching on a daily basis.

**Conclusion:** The findings of this study show that the participants use reflective practice innately. Support by the school and the Department of Basic Education through professional development has the potential to encourage the use of reflective practice for quality teaching and learning.

**Keywords:** Grade R; foundation phase; reflective practice; teaching and learning; knowledge and understanding; professional development.

## Introduction

Reflective practice was first suggested by Dewey (1910, 1938) as a way teachers become aware of their classroom practices. Being aware of their own values and beliefs supports teachers in the construction of classroom environments that support quality learning. Schön (1983:55) describes reflection as happening both *in* and *on* practice. Doing this effects positive change. Pollard (2014) expanded the theory of reflective practice to consider the teachers' personal values and beliefs about education to support professional development. Reflective practice has also been identified by a number of researchers as a mechanism that can support and enable quality teaching and learning (Brown et al. 2017; Excell & Linington 2010; Killen 2015; Rousseau 2015; Shaik 2016). Reflective practice is the process that a teacher uses to give thought to the way he or she teaches and how it benefits the learners. Reflective practice is more than 'thinking' about what is happening in a lesson; it gives meaning to the thinking (ed. Brock 2015:8) and creates the opportunity for teachers to develop a clear understanding of how they are supporting quality teaching and learning. Pollard (2005:94) describes the need for teachers to reflect on their values and roles to support successful teaching and learning.

If reflective practice is valued as a means of ensuring quality teaching, then the following question arises: do teachers have knowledge and understanding of reflective practice and is it implemented to support quality teaching and learning? The research question considers the nature of reflective practice in Grade R classrooms. This article explores the knowledge and understanding of Grade R teachers about reflective practice and how it supports their classroom practice. The focus on reflective practice occurred as it is acknowledged by the Department of Basic Education (DBE 2017:39) and the South African Council of Educators (2019:2) as one of the tools that support quality teaching and learning.

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Atmore, Van Niekerk and Ashley-Cooper (2012:122) determined that early childhood development (ECD) is the base on which successful future learning is built. As Grade R is the first year children experience formal schooling in South Africa (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET] 2017:8), this article seeks to examine the extent to which Grade R teachers' knowledge and understanding of reflective practice inform their teaching as they support the children in their classrooms. Biersteker and Dawes (2008:187) emphasised the need for high-quality teachers and learning programmes as an investment in ECD, facilitating an easy transition for children from Grade R into formal schooling. Excell and Linington (2011:3) stated that 'the pedagogical decisions a teacher or practitioner makes will determine how the "doors of learning" are opened'.

Reflective practice can be extremely beneficial in the Grade R year of schooling as this is a child's first exposure to formal education. It creates the building blocks for future academic and social experiences in the school setting (Excell & Linington 2010:5). The teacher is the person who manages and develops the classroom environment based on his or her knowledge of teaching, knowledge of children and knowledge of his or her own classroom management. Reflecting on what works well and what needs to change can be challenging as the demands of curriculum and the needs of children must be accommodated (Killen 2015:121).

Thus, the aim of this research was to establish the knowledge of Grade R teachers regarding reflective practice. The research objectives included exploring the benefits and challenges of reflective practice for Grade R teachers, through interviews, assuming that they use it as suggested in White Paper 5 on Education (Department of Education 1995).

## Theoretical foundation

The theoretical base of this research is the work of Dewey (1910, 1938), Schön (1983) and Pollard (2014) underpinned by Vygotsky's theory of socio-constructivism (Woolfolk 2014:55). Reflective practice has strong roots in Vygotsky's socio-constructivist theory and supports effective learning. This includes the teacher learning from the children to support each child's development by reflecting both in and on their teaching practice (eds. Cole et al. 1978:89). Reflective practice supports the theory that teachers construct their approach to teaching and learning based on their beliefs, values and understandings.

Current trends in education support the concept of reflective practice; however, the challenges of implementing reflective practice in South African schools have received little attention (Rousseau 2015:6). Teaching and learning are constructed on the experiences and values individuals bring to the classroom. Reflective practice motivates teachers to find solutions, make adjustments and be flexible in order to provide learning environments that could support the needs of each child. Reflective practice can be a powerful and effective tool to transform teaching practice (Finlay 2008:10).

The use of reflective practice as a tool to inform effective classroom practice can help Grade R teachers realise their critical role preparing children for future academic achievement. Reed and Canning (eds. 2010:15) argued that teachers need to be 'intellectually curious' and that teachers should value reflective practice as a way of deepening and understanding the experience of teaching and learning. This intellectual curiosity has the potential to develop a growth mindset (Ganly 2017). Such intellectual curiosity supports the teachers' ability to improve on their practice. Reflective practice is one of the tools teachers can employ to make significant positive changes to teaching and learning that occurs in classrooms. Reflective practice supports teachers as they explore their own understanding of teaching and learning. This self-knowledge informs classroom teaching practice. Belvis et al. (2013:288) suggested that reflective practice helps teachers develop new skills and strategies for teaching effectively.

Teaching involves personal relationships and teachers who practise reflectively are aware of the influence they have on the children they teach, and how the classroom is run. They are then able to provide children with the tools they need to develop academically and socially. The teacher who reflects on the impact they have on children can build close and strong relationships, which offer valuable guidance to each child in the environment (Dewey 1938:7). It is important for a teacher to be able to watch the child, reflect on what the child is doing and how he or she is reacting to the work in order to know what to give the child to meet individual needs. Meeting the individual needs of children supports child development practices positively by providing a variety of learning opportunities as part of the curriculum (Biersteker & Dawes 2008:195). Teachers who reflect on how they practice and how they represent themselves to the children become aware of how they can influence the way a child feels about what they are learning (Dewey 1910:48). Reflective practice encourages the teacher to become sympathetic towards the needs of the child.

Being a reflective practitioner gives teachers the opportunity to observe the children and the environment to support meaningful experiences. It allows the teacher to observe and effectively plan to meet the needs of each individual in the classroom. This process motivates the teacher to be flexible and open to new possibilities in the classroom. Although teachers may not have the skills or knowledge to support themselves and colleagues (Spaull 2019:8), reflective practice may provide a valuable process to acknowledge and remedy the challenges teachers face in the classroom. Dewey (1910:13) defines reflection as being able to overcome inertia and status quo, not accepting things at face value. Teachers who use reflective practice in their classrooms can adjust the aims and outcomes of learning to suit the needs of each child in the environment.

Schön (1983:7) built on Dewey's model of reflective practice by considering the relationship between academic knowledge and the value of practice. Schön (1983:45)

acknowledged the importance of 'practice' and considered reflective practice as the ability to know what the practitioner of a field of work puts into practice. The practitioner may not be aware of what he or she is doing or how to explain it, but he or she uses reflective practice intuitively to effect positive change and growth. Schön (1983:55) proposed that a reflective practitioner is one who is able to reflect both *in* practice and *on* practice.

Reflecting-in-practice is defined by Schön (1987:36) as taking a constructionist view of the world. In this view, the problems or challenges that arise are dealt with as they occur. The reflective practitioner makes adjustments to their reality as they go about a task. Reflecting-in-practice in Grade R allows the teacher to identify 'teachable moments' through observation as a way to maximise teaching and learning which will support the children's learning (Excell & Linington 2015:110).

Reflecting-on-practice involves reflecting on the lesson before it begins and once it has finished (Schön 1983:60). This knowledge helps inform their practice. Reflecting-on-practice enables the teacher to use the knowledge he or she has gained over time to support new approaches to teaching. This may be a challenge for teachers who have taught Grade R for many years, as they may consider themselves expert in their practice. They become comfortable with their routines and way of teaching and may be less flexible when it comes to developing new teaching strategies (eds. Reed & Canning 2010:1).

Pollard (2009) developed the work on reflective practice as proposed by Dewey (1910, 1938) and Schön (1983, 1987). Pollard (2014) viewed reflection as a practice that connects teachers to their personal values and the aims of education, as they understand them. When teachers are able to reflect on the principles that motivate their practice, they can adapt and change, leading to self-improvement. Teachers who are committed to self-reflection are aware of their personal teaching philosophies adapting them to suit the needs of the children and the professional teaching environment (Zinn et al. 2014:104).

In South Africa, Grade R is the first year of formal schooling (Excell & Linington 2010:5). This first year is aimed at helping children master the basic skills required to be successful within the formal school environment. The Grade R teacher plays an important role in shaping how children respond to the school environment. This response is likely to become a key component of the way in which children view teaching and learning. Biersteker and Dawes (2008:186) described this phase of schooling as laying the foundation for future school success. The school environment at the Grade R level should encourage and support learning, utilising high-quality teachers who are well resourced and able to view the child holistically (Biersteker & Dawes 2008:187).

Employing reflective practice within the Grade R classroom supports teachers as they develop strong academic, social

and emotional skills that will continue throughout the child's formal schooling. The reflective practitioner is aware of his or her strengths and challenges and is adaptable in meeting the needs of the children under his or her care.

## Research design

This study is concerned with the knowledge and understanding of Grade R teachers about reflective practice to inform effective teaching and learning. To explore this, it was important to see the classroom through the eyes of the participants in order to gain insight into their understanding of reflective practice. Using the theoretical framework described, an interpretivist paradigm was beneficial to this qualitative case study. The use of the interpretivist paradigm enabled the use of shared meanings to access the Grade R teachers' knowledge of reflective practice within their classrooms and the wider school. Employing qualitative research methods, such as interviews, allowed the researcher to place emphasis on collecting data that occur naturally (McMillan & Schumacher 2010:23).

## Study site and participant selection

Two Grade R teachers in one public school in Cape Town's Southern Suburbs formed the focus of the research. This school is set in what is called the 'leafy' suburbs of Cape Town. This school is a co-educational school with both boys and girls. It offers Grade R to Grade 7. The school is racially diverse and draws children from many areas of Cape Town. The participant teachers described the Grade R programme as consisting of child-initiated learning, with some teacher-initiated learning during the day. They viewed child-initiated learning as the learning in which the children are allowed to move freely between the classrooms, the outside area and garden during the morning. One classroom is set up as the toy room or playroom and another classroom is set up as the art room during the day.

The two teachers were purposively selected to participate in this study. By its very nature, purposive sampling does not represent all Grade R teachers. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007:115) described purposive sampling as enabling the researcher to find participants who are knowledgeable about the phenomenon being studied. The participants in this study are referred to as Teacher A and Teacher B.

Teacher A has a Bachelor of Education degree and a Diploma in Special needs and remedial work. She has been a Grade R teacher at this school for 4 years. She makes the most of visiting other Grade R classrooms around Cape Town in order to get a bigger picture of what is happening in classrooms. As a teacher, she expressed a keen awareness of the diversity of the children in the classroom and how this has made her equally aware of parenting styles and cultural differences that make running the class a challenge at times.

Teacher B has an Honours degree in Education and has been working at the school for 6 years. She has had many years'

experience in other Grade R environments and has been able to instinctively implement aspects into her current classroom. She was exposed to the idea of 'open plan' classrooms and has implemented these concepts at this school. Open plan classrooms use a physical learning environment that provides children with an opportunity to move between the indoor and outdoor environments offered within the Grade R space. She enjoys the opportunities freedom of movement gives the children.

## Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were used for data collection in order to understand the teachers' knowledge and understanding of reflective practice. These interviews allowed for the exploration of teachers' knowledge and understanding of reflective practice through asking probing questions to gain in-depth insight into the participants' use of reflective practice. The core set of 12 questions for the semi-structured interviews was based on information compiled in the process of reading for the literature review. Some of the questions focused on the knowledge and understanding of the participant teachers regarding reflective practice as a tool to improve teaching and learning. These questions were the following:

- What do you understand by the term 'reflective practice'?
- What is the reason you reflect?
- Do you find that reflecting helps to improve your practice? If so, how?
- What do you find challenging about reflecting?
- What would you find beneficial about reflecting?

On completion of the interviews, the recordings were transcribed. The teachers were provided with the transcripts to verify the information. These transcriptions were read, re-read and organised into a theme-based filing system. The transcribed data collected during the interview process were organised into emergent themes based on common words and descriptions used by the interviewees. Thematic analysis as suggested by Nowell et al. (2017:4) was used to identify themes and sub-themes over a period of time. Looking for themes allows the researcher to examine and compare the transcribed data (Yin 2010:210). The data were then categorised into comments and ideas that were connected or similar. Main themes were created and analysed. Thematically categorising the data provided the opportunity to search for patterns of meaning and systematically develop insights from the data gathered. Thematic analysis was an opportunity to 'play' with the data (Yin 2014:135) and discover emergent themes. This provided insight into the varying perspectives held by the participants with regard to reflective practice. To analyse the data in detail, each identified theme was clearly explained. This was written as an interesting and informative account of the data using direct quotations from the participants. Nowell et al. (2017:11) suggest that these extracts of raw data embedded within the account provide validity and richness to the analysis.

## Ethical consideration

Ethical approval to conduct the study was obtained from the Western Cape Education Department and Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) (Ethical clearance number: EFEC 4-8/2018).

## Findings

Using the responses of the two Grade R teachers (Teacher A and Teacher B) to the open-ended questions of the semi-structured interview, five themes were identified to explore their knowledge and understanding of reflective practice. These themes provided insight into the opportunity reflective practice has to support effective teaching and learning in Grade R.

In the initial meeting with the principal and the teachers, they were eager to share their knowledge of reflective practice and spoke confidently about how the school valued reflective practice on a professional level. During the semi-structured interview process, different understandings and interpretations emerged. These different understandings were explored through further discussion to develop a clear sense of what each teacher understood as well as what expectations the school had in the implementation of reflective practice.

The initial response to the question 'what do you understand by the term "reflective practice"?' differed in personal interpretation:

'Just reflecting on what is going well and what's not. So, anything from relationships, from dynamics, in amongst the staff, what lessons, or what I've been covering in my lessons, by trial and error, some things that have worked, some things that haven't worked.' (Teacher A, female, Grade R teacher at current school for 4 years)

'I'm thinking it is about what you have planned and how it has worked in practice and how the children have reacted to it and altering what you do on the basis of that.' (Teacher B, female, Grade R teacher at current school for 6 years)

The above data demonstrate a different understanding of reflective practice held by each of the participant teachers. The knowledge and understanding of the participants about reflective practice provide insights into the expectations and interpretations individuals and schools have regarding reflective practice, if they make use of it as suggested by the DBE.

The five themes that emerged from the data analysis are discussed and align with the aim and objectives of the research based on the theoretical framework presented.

## Discussions of the findings

The research findings are thematically presented to identify Grade R teachers' knowledge and understanding of reflective practice. The five themes presented suggest the use of reflective practice for use in the Grade R classroom environment, both indoor and outdoor.

## Theme 1: Reflective practice as a means for planning

In this study, both Grade R teachers referred to the importance and value of reflective practice as a means of informing their current and future planning. Reflective practice has the ability to give teachers new skills and strategies for teaching (Belvis et al. 2013:288). These skills support the teachers in their planning and implementation of lessons.

Teacher B uses reflective practice to consider how children have responded to what has been taught and then decides how to progress. Reflective practice influences her planning to meet the needs of the children as she reflects on the plans she made and how it worked in practice. Reflective practice as a means for planning is supported by Kruger and Greyling (2015:167) who noted that teachers are able to consider how children respond and progress and use this awareness to inform future teaching and learning. Teacher B further defined reflective practice as a way to evaluate how the children respond to lessons they have been given:

'I think when I am doing my planning I will reflect on ... I'll think of something to do and I'll think will it work in terms of the way the children are at the moment, specific children in my class, previous experience at doing this kind of thing, so that's when I'm doing my planning.' (Teacher B, female, Grade R teacher at current school for 6 years)

Using this information, she makes changes to the lessons she has given by adapting them to suit the children, encouraging them to be successful. She then uses the information when she is planning the same work for another group of children. The use of reflective practice allows Teacher B to incorporate a degree of flexibility when planning lessons in order to ensure lessons are successful for the majority of the children. The ability to reflect on the success or failure of a lesson is an opportunity for her to plan in order to ensure success in the classroom. This allows the teacher to focus on more than the subject matter and puts the child at the centre of the teaching and learning experience. Pollard (2009:292) agrees with this teacher's interpretation of reflection for planning because she thinks about the best way children will learn what is being taught.

Teacher A also expressed her use of reflective practice to inform her planning. She describes reflection as a means to understand what has worked and what has not worked:

'You know the planning; you have to spend a lot of time thinking about it. Knowing what works and what doesn't work, trying new things as well, not being afraid to try new things. Structure is good and soothing, but to try and adapt what you've already got so you don't get bored with the content.' (Teacher A, female, Grade R teacher at current school for 4 years)

She reflects on her practice as a way to remain focused and inspired, to challenge herself to innovate and present lessons in different ways for the children. She values routine and structure as long as it was balanced with being adaptable and

not getting bored. Using reflective practice as a way to keep refreshed and energised as a teacher is what Reed and Canning (eds. 2010:1) referred to when they discussed the importance of making teaching less mechanical and rather allowing one to take on new ideas and respond to changes in a positive way.

Being able to plan knowing the needs of the children is a valuable aspect of reflective practice. Teacher A values creating learning opportunities for children to experience success within the classroom by means of reflecting on planning and encouraging children to try new activities:

'Even in the planning as well, you have to spend a lot of time thinking about it. I think the thoughtful activities benefit the children. I try new things. I am not afraid to try new things.' (Teacher A, female, Grade R teacher at current school for 4 years)

Reflecting on children's positive or negative responses to lessons helps her consider if the lesson was successfully planned and executed, or requires adaptation. By doing so she is consistent with Pollard (2009:5) who supported the need for teachers to reflect in order to improve the learning experiences of the children. Reflecting as a means for planning encourages teachers to think about how their planning works in practice, supporting the decisions they make when planning lessons to ensure successful teaching and learning.

## Theme 2: Reflective practice as a means for curriculum management

Van der Berg (2014:5) values the importance of training teachers to evaluate how the curriculum is delivered by reflecting on all the lessons given as the Grade R curriculum and pedagogy are closely related. Robinson and Rousseau (2018:4) recognised that there is no obvious structure within the curriculum that supports the use of reflective practice on an ongoing basis. In the interviews, both teachers demonstrated that reflective practice helps them consider how the curriculum is organised and managed in their classrooms. The teachers use reflective practice to scaffold the children's learning, especially when they are challenged by the work presented, as explained by Teacher A:

'You select, or ask children to come to that activity that really have difficulties working and engaging with that kind of material ... So I try and scaffold as much as I could, and not just to have it as a once off activity.' (Teacher A, female, Grade R teacher at current school for 4 years)

Teacher A indicated how she reflects on what the children are doing so she has a better understanding of where they need support and practice. Watching the children and reflecting on how they completed a task help her give the children an opportunity to try the activity again, at another time:

'So that they come to the activity again, so kind of equipping them with the necessary skills to be able to make them more confident to try another, new activity because I find that a lot of children do tend to go to the same activities so [I am] trying to make them, expose them to other areas of learning and being

more confident in their own abilities.' (Teacher A, female, Grade R teacher at current school for 4 years)

Pollard (2009:292) supports Teacher A's view of scaffolding learning as a method of managing the learning environment by means of reflecting on what the children need in order to learn best. Reflecting as a means for curriculum management enables the teacher to manage the same activity in a different way, scaffolding the learning for the children:

'Looking at what they need at that time and how we can support them best. ... you know, it's a cycle where everything feeds off each other to know how to work with it best.' (Teacher A, female, Grade R teacher at current school for 4 years)

Van As and Excell (2018:5) suggested that reflective practice as a means of scaffolding ensures the interests of the children are at the centre of curriculum planning.

Teacher B spoke about reflecting on whether or not curriculum requirements are appropriate for the children in her classroom:

'Reflecting what you are doing, modifying, saying no, we'll keep this. I mean with reflecting it's also that when other people try and push other things on you, and you know and you think like the CAPS [Curriculum Assessment Policy Statements], ... so I mean reflecting includes things like saying no, I am not doing that, I know through my observation of the children that this is where I need to be.' (Teacher B, female, Grade R teacher at current school for 6 years)

She uses her reflections to focus on effective interactions with children without capitulating to external demands that do not meet the children's needs. She reflects on her own knowledge and experience of the curriculum, as discussed by Excell (2016:2), to make changes to support the children's learning. Experience has taught Teacher B that policy documents are not always clear and often contradict themselves (Excell 2016:2) and that quality teaching occurs when she is sure of what will work best in the environment to support learning. Zinn et al. (2014:110) acknowledged that the DBE determines the classroom curriculum, which then limits teachers to being mere 'technicians', resulting in the maintenance of the status quo within the classroom. Teachers can use reflective practice as a means for curriculum management to discover what is useful for learning and areas that require change. This is expanded on by Pollard (2009:53) as a means of investigating and anticipating the support children need. By reflecting on the classroom he suggests that the teacher looks for patterns of behaviour and learning.

### Theme 3: Reflective practice as a means for adaptation

Teachers should be encouraged to investigate how they teach, and how children learn in order to adapt the environment to enhance children learning (Osman & Booth 2014:168). The teachers interviewed acknowledge that adapting the classroom environment requires a shift in how they think about their teaching, the children they teach and the needs of the curriculum to improve on practice:

'It's challenging for me, what, how can I stop it or how can I tackle this area.' (Teacher A, female, Grade R teacher at current school for 4 years)

'I can't always change things in the moment, some things you can, some things you can't.' (Teacher B, female, Grade R teacher at current school for 6 years)

Reflecting allows them the opportunity to consider what they know for certain and what is probable. Teacher A described how she reflects on lessons she is giving and thinks about how to create depth of learning for each child:

'You talk about why it is not sticking, can we use more tape on, can we secure it, you know, being the teacher facilitating that kind of activity is nice to see and it extends the children to a certain degree.' (Teacher A, female, Grade R teacher at current school for 4 years)

Being adaptable in a Grade R classroom is described by Pollard (2009:170) as the ability to individualise learning for the children based on the experiences they need. McFarland, Saunders and Allen (2009:506) clarified that teachers who reflect can make changes to their practice with individual children and the whole class. Teacher A adapts her lessons based on her reflections about what is happening in the lesson.

Making sense of experiences and being adaptable to the needs of the children enable teachers to think about their motivation and ability to connect with the children to build relationships (eds. Reed & Canning 2010:3).

Both teachers considered the need for flexibility when teaching in Grade R:

'Because of the nature of Grade R, you have to roll with things sometimes, and so accidental and incidental learning has been quite an important part of learning.' (Teacher A, female, Grade R teacher at current school for 4 years)

'Sometimes I can shift what I am doing in the moment, and I very often can. But if I can't then it'll be a sort of mental note to self. Think about how to deal with that tomorrow in a different way.' (Teacher B, female, Grade R teacher at current school for 6 years)

Both teachers appreciated that reflective practice encourages them to make changes by adapting lessons and the environment to support the needs of children. This is supported by Excell and Linington (2010:8) who described the need for Grade R teachers to use appropriate strategies to mediate purposeful play and learning through reflective practice. Being adaptable requires the teachers to reflect on the response of children to the lessons and to make changes to support teaching and learning.

### Theme 4: Reflective practice as a means for relationship building

Reflecting on the interactions and relationships children have with peers and teachers was highlighted by both teachers as a way of understanding and supporting the needs of each

child in the environment. Verbeek (2014:47) highlighted the importance of relationship as being central to teaching. In the interviews, both teachers spoke about the value of building relationships with the children in their classrooms as a way of setting the pace of the learning to meet the needs of the individual children.

Teacher B expressed her concept about the role of the Grade R teacher succinctly:

'Because I like to individualise, teaching Grade R is only rewarding to me in the context of a relationship with each child. I need to understand where the child is at and try to meet their needs.' (Teacher B, female, Grade R teacher at current school for 6 years)

Her passion for understanding each child in her classroom is evident in her interpretation of the reason she practices reflection. She describes reflecting on her relationships with the children as a way of getting to know each child on an academic and emotional level. This helps her support the children during the Grade R year ensuring that they are well prepared for Grade 1.

Teacher A spoke about reflective practice as a way to build relationships with children, and her colleagues:

'Reflecting ... anything from relationships, from dynamics in amongst the staff ... how I can make it better myself, for the benefits of the kids.' (Teacher A, female, Grade R teacher at current school for 4 years)

This teacher demonstrates an innate awareness of the influence she has on the child's experience at school (Dewey 1910:49) and uses this awareness to support the children. What teachers think about children affects how children experience learning as there is a strong connection between what teachers believe about children and the expectations they have from children (Pollard 2014:141).

Both teachers demonstrated the validity of Reed and Canning's (eds. 2010:1) statement that 'reflecting on practice underpins the work of an early year's practitioner':

'But there are usually things that work better than others ...' (Teacher A, female, Grade R teacher at current school for 4 years)

'I will think about whether I need to ... modify what I do.' (Teacher B, female, Grade R teacher at current school for 6 years)

The teachers make decisions about managing children and the environment based on their reflections on practice. These reflections help them create an enabling environment by providing the right opportunities for those children and keeping the curriculum needs in mind.

Zinn et al. (2014:106) described teaching as socially constructed and relational using a process of inquiry and reflection. Both teachers in our study demonstrated Schön's (1987:101) insights regarding the importance of teachers' relationship with the children as contributing to the social nature of the classroom. They reflected on the children

responding and interacting with peers and adults and using this as a means to support the children. Pollard (2009:170) confirmed and expanded on the use of reflective practice for relationship building as one of the conditions that shapes a child's learning by following their needs and interests. Learning is not one-dimensional, only focusing on what to teach; it is also important to consider how children respond and relate to what is being taught (Osman & Booth 2014:163).

Excell, Linington and Sethusha (2015:1) posit that children in the Grade R classroom learn a broad variety of skills as they interact with the teacher, the environment and their peers. It is vital that teachers build relationships with the children in order to constructively support and extend children's learning experiences.

Teaching happens within a social context and building relationships supports the social environment of the classroom. Dewey (1933:99) describes the social aspect of the classroom as an important part of communication and relationship building. He emphasises the significance of the relationship between the teacher and the child as a critical aspect of a child's current and future academic success. The views of the Grade R teachers interviewed in our study are consistent with that of Pollard (2009:61) who emphasised the value of teacher's understanding of children and their needs. Reflective practice as a means of relationship building is considered an important aspect of the Grade R classroom by both teachers.

### Theme 5: Reflective practice as a means for personal growth

Verbeek (2014:46) described learning to teach as a life-long process. Teaching requires continuous professional development through engaging in self-study with the support of other professionals. Ongoing personal development is also encouraged by Osman and Booth (2014:170) as teachers investigate their personal practices.

Both teachers discussed the importance of using reflective practice as a means of personal and professional self-development. Teaching is a socially constructed occupation and the teacher's own experiences of being a child in a classroom influence their teaching style. Zeichner and Liston (2014:37) referred to teaching as 'emotional labour'. Teachers create their teaching style and methods based on their personal experiences of being taught. Russell (2018:9) explained that every teacher has internalised how they were taught and this affects their personal approach to teaching. Reflecting on personal teaching styles and approaches may provide the opportunity for personal awareness of this influence.

Initially, Teacher A spoke about using reflective practice as a way to be a better teacher for the children:

'And I also think in terms of my personal growth, how I have grown within my own teaching, how can I make it better myself,

for the benefit of the kids?' (Teacher A, female, Grade R teacher at current school for 4 years)

Teacher A's comment demonstrates how she uses reflective practice as a tool to develop self-awareness, which is supported by Appleby (2010:16) who noted that reflective thought enables evaluation of thinking and understanding. Teacher A wants to be a better teacher to help the children achieve their potential and she takes personal responsibility for building an effective and supportive classroom environment. She demonstrates an awareness of how practising reflectively gives her the ability to understand the effect she has on what children think about themselves and the learning environment. Pollard (2009:119) describes the reflective teacher as someone who has enough self-knowledge to know that what they do and how they respond has an impact on the children. He further stated that '[a]s reflective teachers we are aware of how our personal biographies affect what we think and do' (Pollard 2009:119). Teacher A achieves personal development by reflecting on how she changes her responses to events in the classroom:

'How can I tackle this problem or area of difficulty, possibly children of difficulty? You know it's more behaviours and personalities as well as ... and we have to work with that.' (Teacher A, female, Grade R teacher at current school for 4 years)

In the interview with Teacher B, she spoke in detail about how she uses reflective practice as a means of realising her responses to situations and how she can manage those in a way that supports her well-being:

'So I've learnt to reflect on myself, and my own actions and my own responses to things ... To say, ok, I'm generally feeling not enthusiastic or I'm struggling to be patient with that, what could I do about it?' (Teacher B, female, Grade R teacher at current school for 6 years)

'I think; how can I improve the situation ... anticipating a situation. So talking about myself, it's huge, but it's so subtle ...' (Teacher B, female, Grade R teacher at current school for 6 years)

She described an awareness of her personal responses and how she makes changes to alter them when necessary. An awareness of personal responses to situations and reflecting on these can support her in developing deeper self-awareness and professional growth. McFarland's et al. (2009:505) support Teacher B's assessment, as they discuss the importance of teachers being aware of the personal influence they have on the children through their interactions with them.

Dewey (1910, 1916, 1933, 1938) elaborates, at length, on the importance of the teacher being aware of the personal traits and characteristics he or she brings to the classroom. Both teachers interviewed in our study spoke about self-awareness in order to grow personally. Teacher A acknowledged her need for personal and professional growth, which correlates to the child's ability to relate to her as a teacher and ability to learn. As a teacher, she uses reflective practice for personal

growth, is open to change and is aware of her direct influence on children's responding to the learning environment:

'I reflect for personal growth. To improve my classroom practice so that the children can get the best out of the day.' (Teacher A, female, Grade R teacher at current school for 4 years)

'I think; how can I improve the situation ... anticipating a situation. So talking about myself, it's huge, but it's so subtle ...' (Teacher B, female, Grade R teacher at current school for 6 years)

Reflective practice as a means for personal growth helps the teachers assess their responses to situations within the classroom. Appleby (2010:12) described this type of reflective practice as 'empowering' because the teacher is able to know his or her strengths and challenges as he or she reflects on how he or she responds to situations in the classroom. Pollard (2009) discussed the importance of self-knowledge as part of reflective practice. He states that 'of even greater importance is the capacity to know oneself' (Pollard 2009:104). Teachers should be individually aware of their personal strengths and challenges.

## Implications and recommendations

The findings of this research align with Schön's (1983:43) conclusion that 'our knowing is in our action'. The teachers interviewed expressed theoretical knowledge of reflective practice as a concept with which they are familiar but were less able to articulate ways in which reflective practice informs their individual practice. Schön (1983:43) describes this knowledge of reflective practice as innate. Finlay (2008:3) explains how teachers may use reflective practice explicitly as part of a formal process as well as tacitly as part of ongoing teaching practice. The themes that emerged from the data demonstrate a varied understanding of reflective practice. The teachers described the use of reflections to adjust classroom management, planning and the individual academic and social needs of the children. The findings demonstrate that although the Grade R teachers have no formal awareness of implementing reflective practice, they express the importance of responding to the children's social and academic needs. The findings further show that Grade R teachers value the concept of reflective practice as a decision-making tool to assess effective practices or implement change that supports the holistic development of children. Valuing reflective practice does not necessarily imply that it is used optimally within the classroom.

The findings of this study confirm that reflective practice has the capacity to support quality teaching and learning. The individual needs of children are supported as teachers reflect on what is happening in the classroom by making changes as needed to strengthen Grade R teaching.

Based on the findings discussed above, two broad recommendations are made. The first addresses the need for training and awareness programmes that could provide skills and empower teachers to make effective use of reflective practice and the tools that support it.

Van der Berg (2014:5) believes that to improve the quality of Grade R, practical strategies, including reflective practice, should be implemented to support learning opportunities. The strategies include creating communities of practice, as suggested by Excell (2016:4), where toolkits and a framework for reflective practice can be developed. A suggested framework for reflection can include developing portfolios of evidence for teachers and children (Seng & Seng 1996:7). Professional dialogue that includes reflective conversations to learn from others is suggested by Simoncini, Lasen and Rocco (2014:29) and can be a valuable addition to a reflective toolkit. Training that is presented by schools and the DBE will reinforce and support quality teaching and learning in the critical foundation phase and Grade R. Verbeek (2014:46) emphasises the need for teachers to view learning and professional development as a life-long process. Once teachers have developed more than a tacit knowledge of reflective practice, they can be supported in the use of reflective toolkits as suggested by Excell (2016:8).

The second recommendation addresses the need for teachers to use effective reflective tools in order to apply reflective practice in meaningful ways. This will support their classroom practice and develop their professional teaching skills.

## Conclusion

This article explored the knowledge and understanding of two Grade R teachers about reflective practice. It also makes a modest contribution towards gaining better insight into reflective practice as a means for quality teaching and learning. Viewing reflective practice as a spiral process of reflecting *in* and *on* practice allows the teachers to create solutions to problems where the teachers constantly monitor, evaluate and revise their practice to improve teaching and learning. The five themes that emerged from the data explore reflective practice as a means for improving teaching and learning in Grade R. Reflective practice develops the ability to be flexible and make changes (Colwell 2015:63).

Reflecting on the teachers' knowledge and understanding of reflective practice provided insights regarding their desire to support each child in their classrooms. Teachers who are encouraged to reflect as part of their daily practice will be motivated to make decisions based on their reflections. Shaik (2016:2) considers that teachers who are taught the skill of reflective practice are likely to feel inspired to develop quality teaching and learning. They are able to construct the environment, and the curriculum, with a clear understanding of their role and the influence this has on children's perceptions of school. Belvis et al. (2013:279) are confident that teacher education in reflective practice will support quality teaching. Schools and the DBE must consider how they can encourage the implementation of quality reflective

practice to address the challenge teachers face balancing academic pressures and the need for play-based learning in Grade R.

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The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

### Authors' contributions

A.S.C. is responsible for the research and writing of the manuscript. N.S. and C.M. provided guidance and support for final approval before submission.

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### Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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