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The effectiveness of Grade 3 teachers' implementation of poetry through play pedagogies

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Background: Poetry predates all other genres of literature, and it has been argued that the relationship between poetry and language is inextricable. The ability of African people to articulate their own stories was largely silenced by colonialism. Poems and lyrics have been known to create a bridge between individuals in meaningful words and songs.

Aim: This article explores Grade 3 teachers' experiences of teaching poetry and their utilisation of play pedagogies to enhance learning and make it pleasurable.

Setting: Three schools in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, were purposively selected because of their rural location. The sample comprised six Grade 3 teachers who worked in these three rural primary schools. The learners in the study were using isiZulu as a language of learning and teaching.

Methods: Semi-structured interviews, document analysis and non-participant observations were employed to generate the data.

Results: Regardless, Grade 1 teachers know their knowledge of the value of play pedagogies in the development of young children.

Conclusion: Researchers suggest that Grade 3 teachers need to align their practice and lesson plans with Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) proposals and guidelines. Moreover, play pedagogies need to be implemented and these need to be realistically aligned with allocated time frames and available resources to mitigate the severe restraints that impede effective poetry teaching as a tool for facilitating learning.

Contribution: To ensure the success of all Grade 3 learners in the realm of poetry understanding and writing, it is imperative that Foundation Phase (FP) teachers align their teaching to the CAPS pedagogies to expose learners to various forms of poetry.

Keywords: poetry; Grade 3; teaching; learning; zone of proximal development; rural areas.

Introduction

According to Ogunyemi and Ragpot (2015), Grade 3 teachers experience challenges when they endeavour to implement play pedagogies as required by the current Early Childhood Care and Education curriculum in public primary schools. The latter authors explain that, in many developing countries such as Nigeria and South Africa, Grade 3 learners who are not sufficiently trained in play pedagogies experience challenges in conceptualisation and knowledge acquisition. Ogunyemi (2004), Dako-Gyeke (2011) and Vu, Han and Buell (2015) all endorse this notion and argue that some contradictions have emerged in research that show signs of a disconnect between Grade 3 teachers' views on and beliefs about the use of play strategies and what is required by the curriculum that guides public Foundation Phase education. As a result of these controversies, it was deemed necessary to explore rural Grade 3 teachers' views on and beliefs about the implementation of play pedagogies in this grade, particularly as scholarly investigations have highlighted the play methodology as a driver of Foundation Phase teaching and learning not only in the South African context but also worldwide. The study on which this article is based was therefore initiated to gain a deeper understanding of how Grade 3 teachers' theoretical insights were connected to their pedagogical practices, with specific emphasis on poetry teaching through play pedagogies.

Based on the works of Vygotsky (1978), researchers and theorists such as Lunga, Esterhuizen and Koen (2022) and Parker, Thomsen and Berry (2022) affirm that young learners' play activities provide beneficial learning opportunities that support and promote their holistic development. Not only do they argue that play is a valuable activity for young learners to improve the skills that

foster learning and development but they also posit that play provides the young learner with a foundation on which to build all learning experiences. They thus argue that play allows young learners to acquire knowledge and skills that support their learning and that prepare them for the future. A report by Statistics South Africa (2016) confirms that, while many young learners spend a considerable amount of time playing and developing their early learning skills, 63% of learners in South Africa are not exposed to any form of early learning programmes at public primary schools. This statistic is significant as it underscores the need for the implementation of policies that are based on proposals by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF 2012). Although the South African Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) (Department of Basic Education 2011) takes cognisance of this latter guideline and emphasises the need to implement play pedagogies in early childhood education in this country, the question needs to be posed whether this is, in fact, the case in rural schools in South Africa.

The implementation of play pedagogies is significant in early childhood development. Many contemporary research studies on play have focused on Vygotsky's work as it recognises the critical role of play in enhancing learners' learning and development (Chaiklin 2003; Machado et al. 2019). As Grade 3 learners are lodged in the Early Childhood Development (or Foundation) Phase in the South African education system, it seems essential that these learners are exposed to appropriate play-based learning experiences that will stimulate the development of their higher mental functions and facilitate learning that will push them beyond their basic capabilities (Nugent 2017). It is therefore imperative that Grade 3 teachers understand Vygotsky's theory of social development and are able to apply its tenets by devising and adopting play pedagogies for early childhood development in all primary school contexts. Researchers agree that Vygotsky's theory should be utilised to shape public primary teachers' understanding of play pedagogies, and this is true for teachers in rural schools where it is just as vital to develop learners' skills holistically as in any other school in the country (Parker et al. 2019). Therefore, to the authors' knowledge and based on our experience, teacher training institutions in this country include Vygotsky's theory in pre-teacher training modules at the tertiary level to address this requirement. It is against this background that this article explores rural Grade 3 teachers' practical implementation of play pedagogies for effective teaching and learning.

Background to the study

The South African Early Childhood Development curriculum policy formerly focused solely on social interaction for learning and development. However, since 2015, there has been a shift towards the use of play-based learning in the curricula of several countries worldwide. The Department of Basic Education (2011, 2015) and the UNICEF (2018, 2020) both emphasise the use of play strategies in early childhood development. There has also been a growing body of evidence in favour of the use of play-based learning to support multiple areas of development and learning in the early life of a child. Developmental learning includes areas such as the acquisition and development of social-emotional skills, general cognitive development and self-regulation abilities (Frost 2010; Malik & Marwaha 2018). Researchers also agree that, on the physical level, children need to engage in play activities that facilitate both gross and fine motor development (Gashaj et al. 2021). Quite recently, Murtagh, Sawalma and Martin (2020) affirmed that play-based activities encourage learning in pivotal academic subject areas such as Literacy and Mathematics. Parker et al. (2022) and Lunga et al. (2022) affirm that young learners learn from their peers while they play, and these authors argue that it is during such activities that they integrate their language, customs and culture through play activities.

It was against this backdrop that practicing rural Grade 3 teachers' views were elicited on the implementation of play pedagogies in their teaching, with specific emphasis on poetry as a learning tool in the Foundation Phase. The study was initiated with the understanding that there are certain key drivers of play-based learning and that these drivers provide a framework for Grade 3 teachers to understand their role in the implementation of play-based pedagogies. Moreover, it was argued that the adoption of such a framework would shape their decisions in devising appropriate ways to support their young learners' holistic development through play, which is a critical aspect of teaching methodology in early childhood development in contemporary education. Research on culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) suggests that English poetry may still have instructional value for black South African learners, even though it may be alienating because it is not taught in the native tongue of most South African learners. The potential of poetry to connect with learners' real-world experiences is a key area of study for CRP. Research in the United States under the banner of CRP or asset-based pedagogies has demonstrated that meaningful classroom learning and improved academic outcomes can be attained by resonating with students' funds of knowledge, which include their cultural resources, values, worldviews and experiences (Moll et al. 1992). This method disproves the notion that the cultural resources of marginalised students are inadequate or serve as a barrier to learning (Gonzalez & Moll 2002).

Theoretical framework

This research was grounded in Vygotsky's (1978) theory of social development. The main principle of this theory is that a more knowledgeable individual can help learners by guiding them to perform tasks that are just slightly above their current skills level. Therefore, teachers gradually provide progressively less assistance until their learners can do certain age-appropriate activities on their own as they advance in knowledge, ability and understanding. This is a progressive process as learners must be guided until they can take the initiative and perform tasks on their own at ever-increasing complexity levels. Vygotsky (1978) argues

that teaching poetry, for instance, is a pedagogical approach to learning development that is an integral part of guiding learners to achieve what he terms their 'zone of proximal development' (ZPD). Various scholars agree that achieving the ZPD through play-based learning leads to meaningful learner-teacher engagements (Hadebe 2015; Smyrniotis 2021). Sociocultural theories acknowledge that the development of children is influenced by their social interactions as well as the environments in which they live and grow. These environments are typically their respective social worlds. Children are actively engaged in the process of knowledge creation as they experience their world. Through these experiences, they continuously adapt their understandings and negotiate their interactions within their social environments.

Therefore, to achieve progressive levels of development through play, teachers need to foster interaction between themselves as the facilitators of learning and their young children so that learning will occur. In this regard, Vygotsky contends that 'play is the major source of development in preschool years', arguing that children are guided through play to grow intellectually as they engage in unstructured fun activities (Bodrova & Leong 2003, 2015; Taylor & Boyer 2020; Vygotsky 1978). However, in the context of using poetry as a learning and development tool, Vygotsky is non-specific as he argues that any dramatic and make-believe play is an effective tool for learning because it encourages learners' cognitive, social and emotional development (Granic, Lobel & Engels 2014).

Research methods and design

The study on which this article is based utilised an interpretive qualitative case study approach and involved six Grade 3 teachers from three rural schools. The research sites were purposively selected based on the availability of these public primary schools and the convenience of their accessibility. The interpretive qualitative case study approach permitted the researchers' in-depth review of the phenomenon under study and allowed them to explore the meaningful characteristics of real-life events, as proposed by Bouncken et al. (2021). The latter authors propose that a qualitative case study design allows researchers the flexibility of collecting, analysing and interpreting required data that address specific research questions, while it also facilitates the identification of and the ability to deal with validity threats. Three methods were used to generate the data: semi-structured interviews, document analysis and non-participant observations. When the semi-structured interviews were conducted with the rural Grade 3 teachers, an interview schedule was used to guide them to respond to the protocol questions and to talk freely about their experiences, views and beliefs. The semi-structured interviews were conducted 2 weeks before the document analysis phase. This means that the data that were obtained from the Grade 3 teachers' lesson plans could be compared with their expressed views and beliefs regarding the implementation of play pedagogies to facilitate and develop learning among Grade 3 learners in their respective

rural schools. This was a corroboration process that was augmented by non-participatory classroom observations and document analysis. Thus, triangulation was used to verify the data that were obtained by means of the semi-structured interviews and document analysis, which is a process that is endorsed by Babbie and Mouton (2010).

Sampling

The researchers utilised purposive sampling to identify and select the schools and the most suitable participants. Maree and Van der Westhuizen (2009:79) define purposive sampling as 'the selection of participants based on some definite, specific characteristics that qualify them to be holders of required data for the study'. Purposive sampling was thus effective in selecting research participants who would suit the purpose of the research (Mukherji & Albon 2011). Six Grade 3 teachers who worked in three rural primary schools participated in the data generation process. These teachers were selected as it was envisaged that they would be knowledgeable about the pedagogy of poetry teaching in the Foundation Phase and that they would utilise play pedagogies as mandated by the relevant education policy (commonly referred to as CAPS). They were informed that they could withdraw from participating in the study at any point should they wish to do so, but none exercised this right.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Department of Education (Ref.: 2/4/8/1556). The participants' right to anonymity and autonomy was respected in accordance with established ethical standards (Lutabingwa & Nethonzhe 2006; Oppenheimer, Meyvis & Davidenko 2009). The dual tenets of ethical research of doing no harm and doing good were thus rigorously adhered to. The Ethics Committee at the Department of Teacher Education at the University of KwaZulu-Natal gave their blessing for the research project to proceed, while the approval of the Department of Basic Education was also sought and obtained. All the participants signed an informed consent form as proposed by various researchers such as Bertram and Christensen (2014), and their identities are shielded by using coded pseudonyms.

The data that had been obtained using the data generation tools referred to here were analysed by identifying patterns and then formulating themes during a process of collecting, transcribing, editing and coding the interview transcriptions and the field notes (Sutton & Austin 2015). Sufficient time was spent on appropriate classifications and comparing the data so that the findings could be explained and clarified (Sangasubana 2011). Triangulation was used in the analysis and interpretation of the data to ensure the validity and reliability of the findings. Triangulation involved comparing the findings that emerged from the various data generation sources to guarantee that all the conclusions that were reached were based on consensus. Maxwell, Locke and

Scheurich (2013:73) argue that triangulation is a crucial tool for 'increasing insight into a phenomenon while preserving its nuanced components'. However, because of the limited scope of this investigation, the findings are not applicable to the extensive Grade 3 population of teachers in the KwaZulu-Natal Province (Terre-Blanche, Durrheim & Painter 2008).

Research aim and questions

The overarching aim of the study was to determine Grade 3 teachers' efficacy in teaching poetry using play pedagogies with the purpose of enhancing their young learners' development.

To achieve this aim, the following research questions were addressed:

- What are Grade 3 teachers' understanding of the role of play in teaching poetry for learners' development?
- What experience do Grade 3 teachers have of teaching poetry using play pedagogies?
- How do Grade 3 teachers teach poetry?

Data analysis

A thematic analysis process was utilised to analyse the data (Nowell et al. 2017). Data were obtained by conducting semi-structured interviews with the teacher participants and by subsequently following the steps by Creswell et al. (2013) for data analysis. This means that the data were identified and organised according to emerging codes and themes. The data were collected from the teachers who are experienced in the Foundation Phase through the number of teaching years in the Foundation Phase and qualification. We first used the data as is from the research participants were transcribed and codes that were done manually using highlighters and was matched up and collected with data. We used open coding that involved perusing the data by repeatedly reading the transcripts of the participants' responses and the notes based on the document analysis and classroom observations and coding the similarities and difference that emerged. In this process, labels were created that elicited meaning from the information the participants provided (Sutton & Austin 2015). This involved exploring the relationships among the open codes and determining what influenced these connections, what conditions precipitated their occurrence, and what the contexts were in which the teachers used the strategies they employed. Examples of codes were reading fluently, speaking, language, pronunciation, play and understanding. To develop the ultimate key themes and subthemes while coding the data, we marked passages and grouped them according to patterns that had emerged from the reviewed literature as well as from what the rural Grade 3 teachers had said. The themes were those who appeared in the major findings and form part of the headings in the findings chapter. We then tabulated the themes as they emerged. Examples of themes were on the ability to pronounce words in a targeted language as well as the implementation of play pedagogies teachers understand in their respective classrooms. The themes used were sematic

themes, as the researcher used the exact data that were collected from the participants and not latent themes which had underlying ideas and assumptions.

Results and discussion
General findings

Regardless of their primary school settings and the challenges that they faced, most of the participating Grade 3 teachers were aware of the benefits of play for the holistic development of their learners. They were also cognisant of a variety of play-based practices, and they acknowledged that they needed to ensure that their learners were exposed to a variety of opportunities to learn, develop and experience the world around them. The Grade 3 teachers also had appropriate knowledge of using poetry in their teaching in the Foundation Phase, specifically in Grade 3.

However, the implementation of this knowledge and awareness did not coincide with the teachers' classroom practices as they generally failed to implement play pedagogies in the observed lessons. The Department of Basic Education's (2011) policy is clear that play-centred activities are pivotal in teaching and learning in the Foundation Phase and that such activities should be consistently implemented by all Grade 3 teachers. Therefore, all stakeholders involved in the Foundation Phase should take cognisance of learners' rights and ensure that their practices are aligned with South African public primary school policies. However, this study found that the Grade 3 teachers' planning was often well intended, but that their practices and actions were influenced by various intrinsic and extrinsic barriers that supported poetry utilisation but impeded play-centred learning activities. This was noticed regardless of the teachers' sound theoretical knowledge and beliefs; therefore, the theoretical knowledge and practices of the participating Grade 3 teachers conflicted with their beliefs about the implementation of play during lessons when poetry could be used as a useful tool for learning.

Similar to a finding by Zakaria (2022), this study also found that young learners became enthusiastically involved in their learning through poetry as they found it exciting. Zakaria also found that using poetry to teach young learners enhanced their language skills development processes (particularly in English) and facilitated freedom of engagement in lesson activities. This study found that similar positive attributes could be associated with the use of poetry as a tool to enhance learning, and it thus endorses the use of poetry as an effective learning tool in Grade 3.

Specific theme-based findings
Theme 1: Language development

Based on the findings of this study, it is highlighted that, when poetry is used to engage Grade 3 learners in learning, they are assisted in their ability to pronounce words in the target language well, while their understanding of poetry as a means of emotional expression becomes sound and

supports learning. This finding is endorsed by Syamsia and Ismail (2021) and Syed (2020), whose studies posit that teachers in the early childhood development phase need to keep abreast of modern poems that are age-appropriate and that will support young children's learning.

Theme 2: The implementation of play pedagogies by rural Grade 3 teachers

When data pertaining to this theme were analysed, it was revealed that the rural Grade 3 teachers experienced challenges in implementing play pedagogies in their respective classrooms. For instance, question 11 asked if the Grade 3 teachers used play-based pedagogies while planning and executing their lessons. This question also presupposed that the Grade 3 teachers would understand the value of play pedagogies for learning at a young age. However, the data attested to the fact that the participating rural Grade 3 teachers experienced challenges in implementing play-based pedagogies and that this pivotal learning tool was marginalised in the classrooms under study.

Vygotsky's social development theory argues that utilising play in early childhood development creates a ZPD where young learners can learn from their peers. Other studies that were reviewed, such as those by Bodrova and Leong (2003), Johnson, Christie and Wardle (2005), Murtagh and Sawalma (2020) and Lunga et al. (2022), demonstrated the importance of play in early childhood development. Conversely, this study indicated that the rural teachers under study found it very challenging to implement play effectively in Grade 3. This could be attributed primarily to their ineffective planning of appropriate play activities (as was revealed by the document analysis phase of the study) and the lack of effective classroom pedagogies for teaching poetry as a tool for learning *through play*, as was observed during the classroom observations. It was clear that the teachers' awareness of the value of play through poetry teaching was not supported by their planning strategies and their classroom practices. Mitigating contextual factors that contributed to their inability to perform optimally in the classroom and to implement play activities effectively were the lack of appropriate teaching and learning materials and classroom congestion. Various other studies on effective teaching and learning in the early childhood development phase have revealed similar findings (Dako-Gyeke 2011; Ogunyemi & Ragpot 2015). Intrinsic barriers are internal impediments that originate from a learner's personality, mindset, habits or his and/or her individual belief system, and these impediments hinder their ability to attain the desired objectives or outcomes. Intrinsic barriers, such as fear of failure, low self-confidence, diminished motivation and inadequate time management skills, have often been cited as barriers that impede personal growth.

Conversely, extrinsic barriers refer to external obstacles that may impede a learner's advancement. These barriers exist beyond a child's sphere of influence or control and include societal or environmental challenges such as poverty, institutional prejudice, restricted educational opportunities,

inadequate resources, or technology, and other social and/or economic barriers. These issues can be categorised as either systemic or situational in nature and may necessitate external help or intervention to assist the learner in surmounting them.

However, regardless of the rural nature of their primary school settings and the challenges that they faced, most of the participating Grade 3 teachers were aware of the benefits of play for the holistic development of their young learners. They were also cognisant of a variety of play-based practices, and they acknowledged that such activities would ensure that their learners would be exposed to a variety of opportunities to learn, develop and experience the world around them. The Grade 3 teachers had appropriate knowledge of teaching poetry in the Foundation Phase, specifically in Grade 3. However, this should be consistently understood and implemented by all Grade 3 teachers. Therefore, all stakeholders involved should keep learners' rights in mind and ensure that their practices are aligned with South African public primary schools' policies.

Conclusion and recommendations

It seems a travesty that teachers in the early childhood development phase remain deprived of opportunities and support to implement effective teaching strategies that are optimally utilised for effective teaching and learning. This is particularly devastating in Grade 3, which is the final year of the Early Childhood Development phase and the entry grade towards Grade 4. The theoretical framework and recent literature on Early Childhood Development are rich in guidelines that are clearly in support of play-based teaching and learning strategies for young learners, yet such practices seemed absent from the rural classrooms where the study was conducted, regardless of the teachers' awareness of the value of the application of play, poetry teaching and active learning strategies for young children's development. Moreover, as the authors of this article who are involved in and knowledgeable about pre-service teacher training, we are aware of the focus on the theoretical framework (particularly Vygotsky's work) in the early childhood curricula at tertiary teacher training institutions. As a result, this article urges interrogation into why practicing teachers in Grade 3 still fail to implement the tenets of educational theories as well as the very clear guidelines that exist in current education policies. The answer might lie, to some extent, in the legacy of apartheid that left rural schools marginalised and devastated. However, almost 30 years after democracy, numerous changes have occurred in the education sphere and most certainly in teacher training. It is therefore incumbent upon all teachers in the early childhood education context to heed the policies that guide their classroom practices and to implement effective strategies that will support and enhance teaching and learning. It was evident from the findings that the Grade 3 teachers under study were unable (albeit not unwilling) to incorporate play as a pedagogy of learning in their respective rural schools. This finding clearly demonstrates that there is a gap between

teacher training and teacher practice, which means that other teachers in similar circumstances need to be identified and retrained to enhance their skills in the implementation of play pedagogies and even in the teaching of poetry in the Foundation Phase to support effective early childhood learning and development. Future studies should therefore focus urgently on the practical implementation of this proposal, as the prevalence and persistence of limited teaching support material, classroom congestion and ineffective teaching strategies in rural schools are no longer tenable.

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