

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

Abstract

A significant number of young learners entering into Grade 1 in South Africa have not reached the required level of readiness for formal learning due to inadequate early learning experiences. As found in many studies worldwide, these learners are often traumatised because they cannot keep up with the pace and requirements of the formal learning situation, putting them at risk for school failure. Focus group interviews were conducted with Grade 1 teachers at two city schools in Pretoria to explore their experiences regarding the insufficient school readiness of their learners and the impact thereof on the learning process. The predominant concerns emerging from this investigation are the inaccessibility of the current curriculum (Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement – CAPS) for learners with insufficient school readiness, and education policies which seem to work against inclusivity. Although Education White Paper 6 (RSA DoE 2001) states that providing quality education to all learners requires adapting curricula, teaching strategies and organisational arrangements to meet the needs of the learners, the teachers in this study feel that they are not allowed the freedom to do so. Recommendations are made to remedy the situation.

Keywords: School readiness, learning readiness, poverty and deprivation, inclusive education

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Introduction

School readiness has a positive effect on the school performance of a learner in the formal school situation, and quality early learning experiences are essential in order to reach the required stage of school readiness (Van Zyl 2011a). In South Africa, a significant number of young learners have not reached the required level of readiness to cope with formal learning in Grade 1, due to inadequate early learning experiences at home and/or limited access to quality preschool programmes (Landsberg, Kruger & Nel 2011). Green, Parker, Deacon and Hall (2011) state that quality learning opportunities in the early years have a significant impact on a child's development and future school career, especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. They continue by saying that children are vulnerable and fragile during their preschool years, and point out that, due to poverty, the majority of children in South Africa are deprived of quality learning opportunities in the years before they enter school. According to statistics (The Presidency, Republic of South Africa/UNICEF 2009) 68% of South African children live in poverty. As a result, many of them do not reach the required level of school readiness by the time they start school, and therefore they do not meet the criteria that would qualify them as ready for formal learning.

In the implementation of inclusive education, schools are expected to support learners with insufficient school readiness through early intervention strategies in order for them to reach the required level of school readiness. This responsibility of schools is spelled out as follows in the *Salamanca Statement* (which was informed by the principle of inclusion and accepted at a world conference in Salamanca, Spain in 1994):

The fundamental principle of the inclusive school is that all children should learn together, wherever possible, regardless of any difficulties or differences they may have. Inclusive schools must recognise and respond to the diverse needs of their students, accommodating both different styles and rates of learning and ensuring quality education to all through appropriate curricula, organizational arrangements, teaching strategies, resource use and partnerships with their communities.

(UNESCO 1994:11-12)

Yet reality is often very different from visions and ideals. According to Green et al (2011), numerous learners in our schools struggle with the formal learning process due to insufficient academic support, large classes and the inability to deal with the demands of formal education. This often results in poor school performance. The Annual National Assessment (ANA) report of 2013 confirms this alarming trend: only 53% of Grade 3 learners who were assessed could achieve acceptable percentage marks in mathematics, and only 51% in language (RSA DoE 2013).

Hojnoski and Missall (2006) claim that young children who experience learning difficulties early in their school career are at risk of getting caught in a negative cycle of learning problems, antisocial behaviour, and withdrawal from the school environment. The abovementioned ANA results of 2013 indicate that this might be the case for many foundation phase learners in South Africa. The reason may be that many learners are admitted to Grade 1 without being ready for formal learning. These learners experience learning difficulties right from the beginning of their school

career. Dednam (2011:155) states that “these difficulties should be resolved in the first two grades of school, as learners who proceed to higher school levels find it hard or even impossible to overcome such difficulties”.

In a quantitative longitudinal panel study to determine the influence of school readiness on school performance in Grade 1 and Grade 7 (with specific reference to home language and numeracy), Van Zyl (2011b) found that the same learners who were struggling with formal learning in Grade 1 were still experiencing learning difficulties in Grade 7. The backlog that these learners subsequently experience tends to increase at an alarming rate. As a result, the self-image and confidence of these learners are adversely affected, leading to feelings of failure, helplessness and inferiority (Janus & Duku 2007; Magnuson & Shager 2010). Le Cordeur (2010:79) agrees, stating that “learners who are struggling often develop a poor self-image and ... feel like outsiders in the classroom and among their peers”. Insufficient school readiness and the learning difficulties resulting from it should therefore be identified and dealt with as soon as possible in order to give struggling learners a better chance at having a successful school career.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the experiences and concerns of Grade 1 teachers in supporting learners with insufficient school readiness. The findings and recommendations from this study are essential for policymakers and curriculum writers.

Literature review

Much research has been done on school readiness, because of its importance for a smooth transition from the informal preschool environment to the formal learning environment in Grade 1 (Al-Hassan & Lansford 2009; Furlong & Quirk 2011). School readiness has a long-term effect on the development of a learner, including academic progress, a successful school career, employment and the ability to contribute to society (Green et al 2011; Lapointe, Ford & Zumbo 2007). The transition to the formal learning environment is seen as one of the most important changes in early childhood, which explains the worldwide emphasis that is placed on the transition from preschool to Grade 1 (Chan 2012).

When children enter the formal learning environment in Grade 1, they must meet numerous expectations. They are expected to work independently, complete learning tasks, follow a strict class routine and acquire literacy and mathematics skills (Li-Grining, Votruba-Drzal, Maldonado-Carreño & Haas 2010). Criteria for the personal readiness of the learner at school entry, as proposed by the National Education Goals Panel in 1991, include physical well-being and motor development; social-emotional development; approaches to learning; language usage and communication skills; and cognitive skills and general knowledge (in Barbarin, Early, Clifford, Bryant, Frome, Burchinal, Howes & Pianta 2008). These criteria for school readiness, as well as the effect of poverty and deprivation on the personal school readiness of Grade 1 learners, will be discussed briefly in the following section.

Physical well-being and motor development

Readiness to learn requires physical health and fitness, including adequate energy levels for classroom and playground activities (Barbarin et al 2008; Janus & Duku 2007). Ravid, Afek, Suraiya, Shahar and Pillar (2009) found that insufficient sleep results in low energy levels, a shortened attention span, a tendency to fall asleep during class time, mood swings, oppositional behaviour and a lack of motivation. They also point out that tiredness affects emotional stability and cognitive functioning.

As far as motor development is concerned, Van Biljon and Longhurst (2011) assert that children with poorly developed gross motor skills find it difficult to cope with writing, sitting up and being alert in the classroom. Similarly, Sherry and Draper (2012) argue that all aspects of formal learning are based on sufficient physical skills and that a lack of these skills may lead to poor academic progress as well as social and behavioural problems.

Emotional well-being and social competence

Emotional readiness at school entry implies that learners should be able to deal with, regulate, and appropriately express their own emotions, as well as respond appropriately to the feelings of others (Barbarin et al 2008; Janus & Duku 2007). McClelland and Morrison (2003) note independence, responsibility and self-regulation as important social-emotional skills for school readiness. Graziano, Reavis, Keane and Calkins (2007) claim that insufficient emotional readiness at school entry may directly affect learning negatively by limiting the learners' ability to pay attention, and indirectly by causing disruptive behaviour, either of which will add to the learners' inability to keep up with the pace and the requirements of the curriculum.

Bulotsky-Shearer, Fantuzzo and McDermott (2008) explain that the social skills needed for successful entrance into the formal learning environment in Grade 1 include the ability to obey class rules, form friendships and adhere to the social expectations of the learning situation. To this, Farver, Xu, Eppe and Lonigan (2006) add the ability to cooperate, communicate effectively and follow instructions.

Learners should be able to remain seated when expected to, control their own behaviour, and not disrupt the learning process (Bierman, Domitrovich, Nix et al 2008; Romano, Babchishin, Pagani & Kohen 2010). A lack of social skills can lead to behaviour that disrupts the learning process and result in negative relationships with teachers and peers (Romano et al 2010). Hindman, Skibbe, Miller and Zimmerman (2010) refer to a study where teachers indicated children's social competence, and more specifically the ability to control their own behaviour and attention, cooperate with teachers and peers, and learn from and with others, as the most important school readiness skills for children in the early grades.

Approaches to learning

Approaches to learning as the third criterion for the personal school readiness of the Grade 1 learner refers to learning-related behaviour that enables the learner to engage

in classroom activities, including motivation; a positive attitude towards learning; the ability to tolerate frustration (Vitiello, Greenfield, Munis & George 2011); and “curiosity, initiative, persistence and imagination” (Barbarin et al 2008). Pagani, Fitzpatrick, Archambault & Janosz (2010) refer to these aspects of school readiness as the classroom working habits of a learner, which, together with cognitive skills, determine academic progress and success. These skills can be seen as the ideal learning-related behaviour while engaging in classroom activities (Vitiello et al 2011). Chen, Masur and McNamee (2011) propose that approaches to learning are mastered as learners engage in classroom activities and react positively to the demands of the formal learning environment. Similarly, Duncan, Dowsett, Claessens et al (2007) explain that staying focused for longer leads to prolonged engagement in learning activities, resulting in better academic achievement. In other words, approaches to learning are developed through a process of growth while taking part in the learning process.

Language usage and communication skills

The importance of well-developed communication skills in the language of instruction is emphasised by numerous authors (Castro, Páez, Dickinson & Frede 2011; Lessing & De Witt 2005; Prior, Bavin & Ong 2011). According to these authors, learners need to have sufficient vocabulary in the language of instruction and the ability to express their thoughts fluently in order to benefit from formal teaching in Grade 1. The ability to understand the content that is presented and the ability to communicate effectively in the classroom are both essential skills for learning readiness (Roberts, Lim, Doyle & Anderson 2011). Furthermore, the ability to understand oral instructions depends on well-developed oral language skills (Bierman et al 2008; Hindman et al 2010). This may well be the most important of all the criteria mentioned and the toughest barrier to overcome for many second language learners and learners from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Cognitive skills and general knowledge

Bierman et al (2008) distinguish between two aspects of cognitive development that are important for school readiness. The first aspect consists of the learner’s academic knowledge, which depends on the quality of early stimulation in the home environment and/or instruction in a preschool he/she was exposed to, and the ability to acquire new knowledge in the formal learning environment. The second aspect comprises the executive functions, namely working memory, inhibitory control and cognitive flexibility. Learners with well-developed working memory will be able to follow directions and keep instructions in mind while completing learning tasks (McClelland, Cameron, Connor et al 2007). Inhibitory control enables a learner to focus on the task at hand and control his or her behaviour according to the social expectations of the situation (Diamond, Barnett, Thomas & Munro 2007). Cognitive flexibility activates more positive approaches to learning, for example, attentiveness, persistency, willingness to accept challenges, and the ability to control own emotions and behaviour (Vitiello et al 2011). Welsh, Nix, Blair, Bierman and Nelson (2010) state that social competence and self-regulation are fostered by these executive functions,

which enable learners to successfully engage in learning activities with their teachers and peers. According to Roberts, Lim, Doyle & Andersonl (2011), executive functions develop through biological maturation, but are also strengthened by preschool stimulation and learning opportunities. Welsh et al (2010) and Vitiello et al (2011) explain that cognitive development is often delayed when children grow up in environments deprived of stimulating learning opportunities.

The effect of poverty and deprivation on school readiness

Growing up in a poor neighbourhood can have a negative influence on school readiness and academic achievement, as well as on the physical development and behaviour of children (Halle, Zaslow, Zaff, Calkins & Margie 2001). Children from disadvantaged backgrounds are often deprived of preschool stimulation at home and attending good quality preschools (Li-Grining et al 2010; Piotrkowski, Botsko & Matthews 2001). As a result, they have a heightened risk of school failure, which has serious and long-lasting consequences. Many studies have proven that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are less ready for formal learning than their more advantaged peers (Azzi-Lessing 2010; Han, Lee & Waldfogel 2012; Janus & Duku 2010; Mistry, Benner, Biesanz, Clark & Howes 2012). School readiness is regarded as a multidimensional construct that includes children who are ready to learn; schools that are ready to accommodate learners with diverse needs; and parents and communities who support learners' development. As learning starts long before school entry, stimulation during the preschool years should not be underestimated. External factors that have an impact on the personal readiness of the child include the expectations of the parents, the readiness of the school, preschool experiences, and the child's environment.

Grade 1 teachers have an important responsibility to support learners with insufficient school readiness. Numerous suggestions have been made by authors of school readiness literature about how such learners should be supported (Berhenke, Miller, Brown, Seifer & Dickstein 2011; Bierman et al 2008; McClelland & Morrison 2003; Sheridan, Knoche, Edwards, Bovaird & Kupzyk 2010; Vitiello, Moas, Henderson, Greenfield & Munis 2012). These include establishing nurturing relationships with the learners, giving positive feedback, and providing stimulating classrooms. In addition, expectations, teaching strategies, and the curriculum should be adapted to suit the individual needs of learners.

The present study sheds more light on the concerns of Grade 1 teachers over learners with insufficient school readiness and the fact that these learners are unable to keep up with the pace and requirements of the formal learning process.

Research method

A qualitative approach was followed in this case study, which aimed to explore the impact of insufficient school readiness on teaching and learning in Grade 1. Two urban schools in Pretoria that currently accommodate large numbers of learners from disadvantaged backgrounds were selected through purposeful sampling. All the

Grade 1 teachers from the selected schools were asked to take part in the research. Both experienced (four) and beginner (three) teachers were interviewed in order to explore their experiences regarding the level of school readiness of their learners and their concerns about the impact of insufficient school readiness on teaching and learning.

Research sites and participants

School A is an urban school situated just outside the city centre of Pretoria, which accommodates 90 Grade 1 learners. School B is an urban school situated about 5 km outside the city centre of Pretoria, with 107 Grade 1 learners. Although both are urban schools, the majority of their learners come from rural areas outside Pretoria and are transported to school and back to the rural areas on a daily basis. School A has three Grade 1 classes with 30 learners each, and School B has four Grade 1 classes with 27 learners each. Both schools are equipped with the necessary resources, apparatus and books. The Grade 1 classrooms are designed and equipped in such a way as to provide the learners with as much stimulation as possible and create a welcoming learning environment.

The more experienced teachers were confident and eager to discuss the effect of insufficient school readiness on teaching and learning in their classes and provided detailed answers to the interview questions. They appeared to be passionate about teaching. The novice teachers (less than five years of teaching experience) appeared less confident and more nervous and hesitant about their answers. They clearly relied on the more experienced teachers for guidance.

Data collection and analysis

Semi-structured focus group interviews with the Grade 1 teachers were conducted separately at the two schools. The predetermined semi-structured questions mainly focused on their views of their learners' level of school readiness; the factors they regard as the main causes of insufficient school readiness; and the effect of insufficient school readiness on the teaching and learning process in their classrooms. The interviews were recorded with the permission of the interviewees, and the recorded interviews transcribed and thematically analysed.

Research findings

The experiences and concerns of the teachers in this study regarding the insufficient school readiness of their learners and the impact this has on the teaching and learning process, will be discussed with regard to the criteria for personal school readiness mentioned above. Thereafter, the predominant concern of the Grade 1 teachers in this study, namely that their learners are not ready for the current curriculum, will be discussed.

Insufficient school readiness of the Grade 1 learners

The teachers at School A noted that, based on their experience, the Grade 1's of 2013 was a very weak group as far as school readiness is concerned and added that the

school readiness level of their learners appears to be declining. The majority of their learners come from outside the feeding area of their school and the teachers pointed out that only a small number of them attended preschools offering high quality programmes. Many of the Grade 1 learners at School B attended the Grade R classes at the school, although they also live outside the feeding area of the school. The teachers at School B were impressed with the improvement in language development of their Grade 1 learners compared to what they have experienced in previous years.

“Well it has improved, because our Grade R teachers are excellent teachers. I’ve definitely seen an improvement from last year to this year.”

Although the teachers at School B were convinced that the Grade R classes at the school made a significant difference to the language development of their learners, it was not enough to ensure sufficient school readiness, as will be explained presently.

Physical well-being and motor development

One of the concerns of the teachers in this study was that the learners are falling asleep in class as a result of being overtired. They also suffer from a lack of energy and are unable to concentrate.

“Those children have to get up at four o’clock in the morning then they are dead tired, the little ones are sleeping in the class. They are fast asleep. Fast asleep.”

Another consequence of the fact that the children from rural areas have to leave home very early in the morning is that most of them come to school without having had breakfast. According to the teachers, this adds to the learners’ low energy levels in the morning.

The teachers at both schools mentioned that the gross motor skills of many learners are poorly developed, resulting in low muscle tone and poor balance. In addition, many learners’ fine motor skills are also poorly developed, causing them to struggle with the colouring-in and cutting activities required in the Grade 1 curriculum. This, in turn, results in a slow work tempo and work that is incomplete and untidy, leading to discouragement and poor self-image in many of the learners.

“The little ones soon feel ‘I cannot do what my friends can do’ they know very well that they cannot cope. And many times I can see that the child is losing all interest, ‘I cannot do it, so why should I try?’”

Emotional well-being and social competence

The teachers are concerned about the fact that many of their learners are not able to work independently. They also mentioned that learners who lack emotional school readiness are not able to take care of their belongings, resulting in the loss of stationery, teaching aids and books. According to the teachers, these learners feel helpless and start crying when they cannot find their belongings, which is a clear indication of their insufficient emotional readiness to cope with the demands of the learning situation.

“You spend half an hour to look for it, because if he doesn’t find it he starts crying. Emotionally they are not ready yet; they do not know how to handle themselves and how to look for something.”

Many of the learners were enrolled for Grade 1 at the age of five, turning six before the end of June, which is allowed by the law, but not always in the best interest of the young learners.

“And then they are far too young. We had one who just turned six today. Many of these little ones are intelligent, but not at all ready to be here.”

The teachers are concerned about the fact that basic skills which the learners should have mastered before entering Grade 1 are not in place.

“These little ones are not able to listen. Discipline, it is a big problem. They cannot sit on a chair yet, they cannot sit still for one second [...] and the basic things that a young child of six already should know, they do not know. For example, sit on your chair, listen to the teacher, stop fiddling, these things, every child has a problem if you look at it this way. Basic instructions, for example, take out your book, it takes forever [...] Concentration, it gets worse every year. It is very bad.”

As a result, the teachers experience their learners as disobedient and disruptive. They feel that they have to spend a lot of time teaching the learners to obey class rules and adhere to the social expectations of the formal learning environment, resulting in a loss of teaching time. This has a tiring effect on the teachers.

“Just look at us, we are tired and it is only Monday.”

They also pointed out that the learners are unable to work in groups (a skill that is expected of them) as a result of their inability to pay attention, follow instructions or obey class rules.

“In my class I cannot do group work, they fight about everything, they cannot share, give one another a chance, taking turns.”

The teachers indicated that they would prefer single seating arrangements for some of the learners, but it is not always practical due to the large classes.

Approaches to learning

The learners with insufficient school readiness are unable to work independently or focus on their work. They struggle to concentrate, are unable to regulate their own emotions and behaviour, and lack the persistence to complete learning tasks. These learners do not benefit from the learning activities in the classroom because they are not ready to engage in the activities in the first place, which leads to repeated failure and explains the discouragement and poor self-image mentioned by their teachers.

Language usage and communication skills

One of the main areas of concern for the teachers in this study is the level of language acquisition of their learners. Although the teachers of School B reported an improvement in the level of language acquisition of their learners (which they ascribed

the excellent work of their Grade R teachers), they still noted that formal instruction is delayed due to the limited language usage and communication skills of their learners. The learners are unable to follow instructions and do not understand the work that is presented to them.

“A big problem is their language. It is not their mother tongue, it is not mother tongue instruction. We first have to get these little children on a level where you can continue with teaching. It is a big problem for us. They do not understand the language.”

Cognitive skills and general knowledge

According to the teachers in this study, the majority of their learners did not attend preschools with qualified teachers or good quality preschool programmes. The teachers also mentioned that the parents are uninformed about the importance and different aspects of school readiness and the expectations their children are faced with once they enter Grade 1.

“The parents and even the preschool teachers don’t know how to teach the children. Those who came from the other preschools are very weak. The mother stood here crying, telling me that the preschool has graduated the child, so for me a big problem is the preschools that are uninformed about what school readiness is, they just send all of them and say that they are ready, but they are not.”

Due to this lack of stimulation and/or preschool instruction, the majority of these learners have not acquired the essential cognitive skills needed at school entry and, as a result, are unable to acquire the new knowledge presented to them. In addition, as mentioned before, many of the learners in this study entered Grade 1 at the age of five and might not have been ready for the cognitive demands of the formal learning environment due to cognitive immaturity.

“I’ve got one child for example, she’s a bright little girl, but if she had stayed behind a year later, she would have been top of the class. But now, because of enrolling too early, emotionally she can’t handle the pressure.”

Cognitive immaturity, together with a lack of preschool stimulation and instruction, explains why many learners in this study had not yet obtained the essential cognitive skills to render them school ready.

The main concerns of teachers supporting learners with insufficient school readiness

The teachers at both schools expressed the opinion that the expectations of the new curriculum are too high and the work load too heavy. They have to rush through the curriculum, even though their learners are not ready and are unable to keep up. They are concerned that the requirements and the classroom reality do not match.

“The pace, the requirements ... It is as if they want to teach these children too soon too many things, they are not ready for it. The policy and the reality in the classroom and what the department gives us, those DoE books, nothing comes together. That book is beautiful, colourful, the most beautiful pictures, but it does not correlate with the policy at all. We don’t know what they want us to do.”

According to the teachers, they are not allowed enough time in the curriculum to lay a proper foundation and are forced to move on to new concepts before the previous ones have been properly mastered.

“For example the mathematics, it is a problem, because they did not master one concept properly, then the next one is there. The foundation is not laid properly, that is why we have so many learning problems later on.”

At both schools the teachers feel that they have to spend too much of their teaching time on formal assessment. According to them, a lot of formal assessment has to be done, sometimes on a daily basis, which is often not possible, because their learners are not ready for it yet. They are concerned about the tiring effect that it has on the learners.

“It’s too much for them. I mean they should still be playing at this stage and to sit down and do formal work, they are really not ready yet. And formal assessment so much each day, it’s tiring for them.”

The Annual National Assessment (ANA) is a nagging concern for the Grade 1 teachers. They know their learners will not be ready in time, since the expectations are unrealistic.

“The ANA tests are like dark clouds above our heads, because if you don’t do well, you are called in and they have a serious talk with you. Now we put a lot of pressure on these children. I feel we go much too fast with them, we have to slow down, but we cannot, we have to get through all this work before September. I get nightmares about it, these ANA tests and my children have to perform.”

According to the teachers, the majority of their Grade 1 learners were not at all ready for the demands of the formal learning environment by the time they entered Grade 1. What should ideally have been a smooth transition to formal learning turned out to be a traumatic experience for many of these young learners.

Discussion

The predominant concern of the Grade 1 teachers at both schools in this study is that their learners are not ready for the current curriculum. They feel that the curriculum is inaccessible and that the pace and expectations are unrealistic. Since there is a lot of pressure on the teachers to implement the curriculum and adhere to the strict time schedule in order to have their learners ready for the Annual National Assessment (ANA) in September, they have no choice but to start with the formal work even though they know that their learners are not ready for it.

McGettigan and Gray define school readiness as “a multidimensional construct that incorporates all aspects of a child’s life that contribute directly to that child’s ability to learn” (2012:16). Roberts et al (2011) confirm this and emphasise that these aspects include schools that are ready to accommodate learners with diverse needs. This means that the school, and by implication the people responsible for compiling the curriculum, should be flexible and prepared to adapt the curriculum according to learners’ needs. In this regard, Piotrkowski et al (2001) argue that schools have a responsibility to provide positive learning environments as well as positive learning experiences for their learners.

This is clearly not the case at the two schools in this study. The teachers are doing everything within their power to accommodate their Grade 1's. The Grade 1 classrooms at both schools are beautifully decorated and have been turned into rich learning environments in order to provide the learners with as much stimulation as possible. The Grade 1 teachers are well qualified and it was clear that they work hard and are dedicated to their careers. Unfortunately, they are not allowed to adapt school policies or the curriculum to meet the needs of their learners. In this regard, Vitiello et al (2012) emphasise that in order to minimise the risk of failure for vulnerable learners in the formal learning environment, the teacher needs to adapt the expectations as well as the curriculum according to the diverse needs of the learners, implying that she knows and respects the background of each learner. Furthermore, the classroom instruction should be adapted to meet the needs of individual learners, and the strengths, abilities and characteristics of every individual learner should be recognised.

During the interviews with the teachers, it was clear that they are well aware of these issues. They have a very good understanding of the vulnerability of their learners. They see their learners struggling, becoming discouraged, and in some cases crying when they are unable to meet the demands of the formal learning situation. They see the damage that is being done to the confidence of the majority of their learners. This leaves them feeling helpless and frustrated. The teachers indicated that if they were allowed to choose, they would prefer to start with a learning readiness programme for the first term of the year in order to improve the levels of school readiness of their learners. They are convinced that slowing down the pace and providing for playtime, which includes practical learning experiences, would be a better option. When so many research studies worldwide have shown the necessity of adapting the curriculum to support vulnerable learners, why are teachers in the South African context not allowed the freedom to do so?

As far as the school policies are concerned, the teachers pointed out that, due to the teacher-learner ratio, they have 27 to 30 learners per Grade 1 class, which would be fine if all the learners were ready for formal learning. However, in the case of the two schools in the study, the majority of learners are not ready for formal learning, which means that more individual attention is needed. Graziano, Reavis, Keane & Calkins (2007) state that, due to the teacher-learner ratio, the Grade 1 classroom is characterised by an increased emphasis on independent functioning and decreased support when compared to the preschool or home environment. This is the opposite of what is needed in a Grade 1 classroom where the majority of learners are struggling due to insufficient school readiness. The teachers feel that there is no time to provide individual support to learners who are struggling; nor is there time to lay a strong foundation by consolidating new concepts. They suggested that smaller classes would be a great help, but this decision is not theirs to make.

Another school policy which the teachers in this study would like to change, if they had the power to do so, is the policy on heterogeneous grouping of learners. They explained that the diversity amongst their learners is so great that it becomes impossible to address the individual needs of learners. The learners with insufficient

school readiness need a slow working tempo, with additional work on a concrete level and individual support, while the learners who are ready for the formal work are able to keep up with the pace and requirements of the curriculum. The stronger learners become bored when their classmates struggle, which often results in disruptive behaviour. They suggest homogeneous grouping of learners according to either school readiness levels or proficiency in the language of instruction. This would enable all the learners in the class to work at a comfortable pace and would allow the teachers to prepare their lessons according to the learning abilities of their learners.

Excessive assessment is another concern for the teachers in this study. They have to spend a lot of teaching time on formal assessment, which sometimes have to be done on a daily basis. Besides the fact that it is very tiring for the learners, the teachers are also concerned about the effect of repeated experiences of failure on their learners, as the majority of them are not able to execute the assessment tasks. Here again, the teachers have to do what is expected of them and not what they believe is in the best interest of their learners.

Teachers have the responsibility to adapt the curriculum, their teaching methods and the assessment strategies to meet the diverse needs of their learners. This is in accordance with the policy for inclusive education as stated in the *Education White Paper 6*, namely that inclusive education is about “changing attitudes, behaviour, teaching methodologies, curricula and the environment to meet the needs of all learners” (RSA DoE 2001). The document states that inclusive education is about “maximising the participation of all learners in the culture and the curricula of educational institutions and uncovering and minimising barriers to learning” (ibid). However, looking at the research findings, it seems as if the inaccessible curriculum, excessive assessment of the learners, and the policies on teacher-learner ratios and heterogeneous grouping of learners are in fact creating barriers to learning by taking away teachers’ freedom to implement the principles of inclusive education. Teachers are often overwhelmed by the demands of highly vulnerable children and they are under a lot of pressure to meet the diverse needs of these learners. All the aspects of insufficient school readiness that were addressed in this study emphasise the vulnerability and diverse needs of these learners. This explains the teachers’ concerns and their stressful working conditions, as well as the disillusionment of the young teachers who seemed to be overwhelmed by the reality of teaching.

A question that comes to mind is: Why is there a disparity between the policy of inclusive education and the expectations of the DoE when it comes to implementing the curriculum and school policies in classrooms where vulnerable learners need support? Teachers are pressurised into implementing an inflexible curriculum against their better judgement. They are not allowed to make changes to the curriculum, the way learners are grouped, the size of classes, or the assessment that has to be done. The policymakers and curriculum writers are not listening to the voices of the teachers who are the experts in teaching vulnerable Grade 1 learners. Educational authorities are ignoring the urgency of the wake-up call they get from the alarming results of the Annual National Assessment. What would it take to bring about a change?

Conclusion

The fact that Grade 1 teachers are pressurised into implementing a curriculum which they find inaccessible is a cause for concern, and the effect this has on learners who are unable to keep up with the pace and requirements is upsetting. Does this mean that our schools are not ready to support learners with insufficient school readiness?

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

According to the teachers in this study, the teaching process is jeopardised by both the insufficient school readiness of their learners and the fact that the respective schools are not prepared to support these learners by addressing their needs. Even though the teachers are well trained and know exactly what is needed to remedy the situation, they must adhere to the stipulations of educational authorities regarding the implementation of the curriculum, as well as the policies on teacher-learner ratio and the heterogeneous grouping of learners. This prevents them from implementing inclusive education by adapting the curriculum and their teaching strategies to suit the individual needs of their learners.

Recommendations

According to the empirical research findings, there is pressure on Grade 1 teachers to adhere to the policies of teacher-learner ratio and the heterogeneous grouping of learners. Considering the fact that not all Grade 1 learners enter the formal learning environment with the same level of school readiness, these policies should be flexible and teachers should be allowed to use their own judgement to make changes in the best interest of their learners.

Similarly, it is clear from the empirical research findings that implementing the current curriculum requires all learners to work at the same pace and meet the same requirements. In other words, it seems as if a one-size-fits-all approach is being followed. This contradicts the principles of inclusive education as stated in *White Paper 6* (RSA DoE 2001:16), namely that the implementation of the curriculum should be flexible and that teachers should have the freedom to adapt teaching strategies and learning content according to the needs of their learners. The discrepancy between the policy of inclusive education and the way in which teachers are expected to implement the curriculum requires urgent attention. In this regard, curriculum writers and education authorities should consult experienced Grade 1 teachers for advice when drafting policy measures for supporting and teaching learners who are vulnerable due to insufficient school readiness.

Many of the suggestions made by authors of school readiness literature (see the 'Literature review' section) about how learners with insufficient school readiness can be supported in the classroom could be beneficial in the South African context and can be implemented through the continuous training of Grade 1 teachers.

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