

## Grade R Teachers' Experience in Preparing Grade R Readiness: How Grade R Readiness Impacts Grade One Teaching

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### ABSTRACT

The development of Grade R readiness in South Africa's Foundation Phase presents ongoing challenges that significantly impact Grade One teaching. This study sought to investigate how Grade R readiness influences Grade One instruction, focusing on the methods, skills, and strategies employed by Grade R teachers and their subsequent effects. To conduct this investigation, the study adopted a qualitative research design with a cross-sectional case study format, utilising Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. This theoretical framework provided a comprehensive approach to exploring the multi-level developmental processes related to Grade R readiness. Specifically, it examined how learners interact within various systems, their understanding and physical engagement with their environment, and how these factors influence the educational context. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, observation, and document analysis. The findings indicated that, while both schools developed readiness, their understanding of how readiness is developed, and the approaches used in Grade R classes differed. Additionally, the study highlighted those policies from the Department of Basic Education often created setbacks in practice and implementation within schools. These policies tended to lack clarity or support for effective application, thereby hindering the development of a cohesive and comprehensive approach to Grade R readiness.

### KEYWORDS

Learning areas; policies; themes; storybooks; challenges.

## BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

A lack of standardisation or oversight of expected outcomes from Early Childhood Development (ECD) poses significant challenges for Grade One teachers. In the absence of standardised ECD outcomes, children may arrive in Grade One with varying levels of basic skills in areas such as literacy, numeracy, social interaction, and motor skills. Griffiths (2020) claims that this disparity forces teachers to adopt a remedial approach, focusing on bringing all students up to a basic level of competence before they can effectively engage with the Grade One curriculum. The Minister of Basic Education, Angie Motshekga, stated that there is an urgent need for the implementation of two years of Early Childhood Development (ECD) schooling before Grade One. This would shift the responsibility for ECD from the Department of Social Development to the Department of Basic Education. As a result, the DBE (2015) developed the Grade R (a preparatory class before Grade 1) Resource Kit Teacher's Guide, which provides weekly lesson plans from terms one to four aligned with the guidelines in the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), Department of Basic Education (Segooa & Molise, 2023).

According to Erasmus et al. (2015), many young learners in South Africa are underprepared when they start formal education in Grade One, exhibiting stark differences in their cognitive abilities. Currently, Grade R is a part of Early Childhood Development (ECD) education in the Foundation Phase. ECD refers to the period when children are between one and six years old before they enter primary school. Griffiths (2020) argues that during this time, a child's development can be significantly impaired by a lack of quality support or stimulation. In South Africa, Grade R was introduced in 2001 as a preparatory phase for formal learning. Before this development, pre-schooling was meant to offer various preparatory experiences to equip children with skills for smooth formal learning. However, Richter and Samuels (2018) state that Grade R is now part of the Foundation Phase Grades 1-3 of schooling, falling under the Department of Basic Education (DBE). According to CAPS (2011), learners are not obligated to attend Grade R, implying that it is not compulsory for one year. Nonetheless, in 2019, the Minister of Education emphasised the need to introduce two years of compulsory Grade R education considering the impact of Grade R readiness on other grade levels.

The policies regarding the age at which children enter Grade R classes vary significantly between countries, reflecting different educational philosophies and developmental considerations. In South Africa, the South African Schools Act (SASA) of 1996 stipulates that a Grade R learner must be 4 years old, turning 5 by June of the following year. This policy aims to ensure that children are developmentally ready for the structured learning environment of Grade R, which serves as a preparatory year before entering formal schooling in Grade One. In Austria, since 2010, all 5-year-olds have had to attend kindergarten. Similarly, Niklas and Tayler, (2018) highlighted that in Columbia "transition classes were also compulsory for learners who are 5- to 6-year-old, and they attend classes at primary school". However, in Ghana, due to the learning struggles of 3- to 4-year-olds, the government recommended that learners attend kindergarten for two years when they are 5 years old (McCoy, 2019).

The study by Segooa and Molise (2023) underscored significant challenges faced by Grade One learners in South Africa due to their lack of readiness, which affects both the teaching-learning process and the coverage of the prescribed curriculum. This lack of readiness can lead to various negative outcomes, such as demoralised and frustrated teachers, and ultimately unfulfilled learning objectives. Therefore, the objectives of this study were: (a) to discover ways that best cater for school readiness creation in Grade R, (b) to discover methods that can be employed to better equip teachers so that they create school readiness in young learners, and (c) to gain a clear understanding of what makes school readiness creation in Grade R a challenge.

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The study explored the impact of Grade R readiness on Grade One teaching using Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory. This theoretical framework, proposed by Bronfenbrenner (2000), highlights the multiple layers of influence on a child's development, thereby emphasising the importance of social interactions within various contexts. According to McLeod (2020, p. 5), a developing human organism engages in increasingly complex reciprocal interactions with other individuals, objects, and symbols in its immediate external environment. Hardman (2018) noted that theories have differing perspectives on how learners' development is shaped and influenced across various stages.

A student's overall growth is connected to various aspects, including different domains, personal traits, influences from others, historical and cultural contexts, and experiences from early stimulation that are linked to the child's future development (De Witt, 2017). According to Sigelman and Rider (2019), holistic development is shaped by multiple contexts that affect a person's growth, encompassing both visible and invisible factors. Visible factors include social and physical environments like neighbourhood, family, country, historical era, and culture, while invisible factors involve ideals, customs, and values. Humanistic, psychosocial, and cognitive theories can be utilised alongside Bronfenbrenner's EST to comprehend the holistic development of Grade R students.

Soyer (2019) maintains that the theory of ecological systems highlights the continuous process of human development, which involves individuals' comprehension of their surroundings and their engagements within them. In this study, the home environment was considered the microsystem as it plays a crucial role in shaping the child's initial development and readiness for school. The school environment, encompassing interactions with parents, teachers, peers, and caregivers, forms the mesosystem. The ecological systems theory encompasses various aspects of the learner's development, such as social, physical, emotional, cognitive, and language development, with a specific focus on psychosocial aspects as fundamental to human development (De Witt, 2017). Ferreira et al. (2018) affirm the importance of this theory in promoting psychosocial well-being and its role in regulating interactions and interrelationships among learners.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In the past, a child's readiness for school was assessed based on their functional abilities. However, Harcourt's research (2018, p. 68) suggests that 40 years ago, there were various theories and viewpoints on what constituted school readiness. Today, the focus has broadened to encompass social skills and personal responsibilities, with parents and society playing a crucial role in this process (Pan et al., 2019, p. 2). According to De Witt (2017, p. 179), school readiness is achieved when a child is prepared to manage the challenges associated with formal educational settings, considering their overall personal development.

Van Rensburg (2018) observed that in 2001, the Department of Education (DBE) in Gauteng shut down all preschools and substituted them with Grade R, which serves as a preparatory year for formal learning. This change aimed to provide children with various preparatory experiences to equip them with the necessary skills for a smooth transition into formal education (Bhise & Sonawat, 2016). According to Richter and Samuels (2018, p. 1), Grade R is categorised under the DBE as part of the Foundation Phase Grades 1-3 of schooling and is also a component of a wider national strategy to enhance early child development, overseen by an Inter-Departmental Steering.

Van der Berg (2018, p. 71) elaborates that the implementation of Grade R, also known as the reception year, is aimed at addressing the difficulties experienced by underprivileged students who lack sufficient support at home. This early intervention initiative is structured to offer academic assistance to children and bridge any potential educational gaps as they move into Grade One. Although Grade R attendance is not compulsory under CAPS (2011), it is widely recognised that this initial year of formal schooling can have a substantial impact on a child's academic journey. By focusing on the development of academic and social skills, as well as fostering independence, Grade R can establish a solid groundwork for future success. It is important to note that typically, students in Grade R are five years old.

In 2019, the Minister of Education, Angie Motshekga, made a significant decision to emphasise the importance of implementing two years of mandatory Grade R education. This decision was based on the impact of Grade R readiness on other grade levels and went against the recommendations of CAPS (2011). During a national address, Minister Motshekga explained her stance on making Grade R compulsory for two years and highlighted the various benefits that children gain from attending Grade R classes. These benefits include access to extensive physical, financial, educational, and human resources during their year of preparation for formal schooling.

Ireland follows a system in which children start school at the age of four, and their readiness for school is determined based on child-led and developmentally appropriate criteria, as agreed upon between 1994 and 2012 (Ring et al., 2016, p. 24). In contrast, in the USA, school readiness is determined based on age, considering the diverse social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development of the learners. In the USA, the preschool years are known as the kindergarten stage (Erasmus & Van Rensburg, 2016). CAPS (2011) suggest the use of alternative

assessment standards in the final year of Grade R, with the expectation that Grade One learners should be well-prepared in all aspects, including linguistically.

In South Africa, Knotze (2015) suggests that Grade R and pre-Grade R might resemble a diluted version of Grade One due to the limited skills and knowledge of ECD practitioners. This could result in a pre-Grade R curriculum that mirrors primary school rather than a play-based curriculum tailored to the unique developmental needs of four-year-olds. Additionally, according to Van Zyl, Le Roux, and Van Rensburg (2016), a student's performance in Grade One can directly impact their literacy and numeracy development in South Africa.

Research indicates that insufficient results in school-readiness assessments can negatively affect a child's performance in Home Language and Mathematics during their first year of formal education. According to Pan, Trang, Love, and Templin (2019, p. 1), students who have stronger literacy and math skills when they start kindergarten are more likely to achieve higher grades in these subjects in the following years. In essence, this unpreparedness can manifest in several ways, impacting the child's academic trajectory and overall school experience.

The Department of Basic Education (DBE) has partnered with Innovation Edge, a catalyst for innovation and social impact investment. Together, they have developed an effective assessment tool to determine the proportion of students who have completed Grade R and are ready to progress to Grade One. Referred to as the Early Learning National Assessment (ELNA), this tool evaluates a child's cognitive and social abilities, which are crucial for the development of literacy and numeracy skills. Furthermore, the ELNA aids in evaluating the influence of Grade R education on a child's transition to Grade One.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research design**

For this paper, a qualitative case study was selected as the research design. This approach allowed the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences and perspectives of individuals or groups, specifically regarding the impact of Grade R readiness on Grade One teaching. Johnson et al.'s (2020) work served as the basis for this exploration. Using a qualitative approach to data gathering was optimal, as it enabled the researcher to directly observe how individuals used their understanding to communicate their thoughts within their context, following Creswell's (2014) methodology. This approach offers several advantages in understanding complex phenomena and capturing the richness and depth of human experiences. In generating data, the researcher followed a qualitative research design procedure, which involved various strategies to collect essential information (Pawar, 2020), such as face-to-face interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis.

## Context of the study

To conduct the study, it was crucial to have a thorough understanding of the research site. As such, the researchers carefully selected two schools from different circuits within the Capricorn South District of the Capricorn Municipality in Limpopo Province. Both schools were quintile 3 institutions and were intentionally selected using a purposive sampling technique. Additionally, school A was specifically earmarked by the district to participate in the Molteno Project, which aimed to enhance teacher training and readiness for indoor and outdoor activities.

## Selection of participants

The participants for this investigation were selected using a purposive sampling technique. As noted by McMillan and Schumacher (2014), this method involves identifying cases that offer information-rich insights for a thorough examination. Ames et al. (2019) further suggest that the researcher must carefully choose participants who can provide pertinent and substantial data on the research question and topic.

**Table 1.**

### *Teachers' Experiences*

TEACHERS	PROFILES & EXPERIENCES
P1	A senior teacher with qualifications from School A who specialises in Grade R education. She received training as a senior teacher and had accumulated 10 years of teaching experience by that time. At the time of the study, she had already been teaching Grade R for five years. Due to her fondness for young children, she willingly volunteered to teach in Grade R.
P2	Grade R practitioner (not yet qualified according to NQF level five) who gained teaching experience by volunteering at a preschool. Her passion for working with children motivated her to teach at the preschool even though she initially lacked the skills to teach Grade R. She sought guidance from experienced Grade R teachers and learned through peer assistance. After obtaining her Grade R Early Childhood Development (ECD) teaching diploma, she adapted quickly to improve her teaching abilities in Grade R. She is a dynamic individual who enjoys exploring different environments and demonstrates psychological flexibility and tolerance in various situations.
P3	A Grade R practitioner with a qualification at NQF level five. During this period, she pursued a diploma in Early Childhood at a university. She accumulated five years of teaching experience in Grade R. Previously, she spent six years working at a preschool. She has been working at School B since 2021. She expressed her fondness of working with children, citing her love for them and enjoyment in playing with them.
P4	A teacher with the necessary qualifications who began her career as a Grade R practitioner. During the study, she had accumulated eight years of experience as a practitioner and two years as a qualified Grade R teacher.

For this study, four Grade R teachers were chosen since they were responsible for fostering and nurturing the learners' readiness at their respective schools. The sample size was adequate for the researchers to promptly gather sufficient data from the participants. The teachers had varying levels of exposure to developing Grade R readiness in their schools. Both schools were situated in rural communities and contained students with and without preschool experience. To safeguard the anonymity of the participants, pseudonyms such as Participant 1 (P1), Participant 2 (P2), Participant 3 (P3), and Participant 4 (P4) were employed.

The teachers who participated in the program reported varying experiences when it came to preparing Grade R students for school readiness, depending on the schools they worked at.

### **Research instruments**

To gather data, the researchers utilised structured interviews, observations, and document analysis. The teacher participants from two different schools who were interviewed had varying and extensive experiences in developing reading proficiency among Grade R learners. In conducting these semi-structured interviews, authentic and challenging experiences from the teachers were obtained which were instrumental in answering central questions such as the effect of Grade R readiness on Grade One teaching. Through observation, the researchers were able to learn more about the challenges faced by the teachers in developing readiness and how they tackled these challenges. This information provided invaluable insight into how preparing learners for readiness in Grade R can positively or negatively impact Grade One teaching. After validating the information gathered through data triangulation, the findings and reviewed literature was compared, recorded and the conclusions were presented. Additionally, document analysis was employed to obtain in-depth insight and clarify results linked to experiences and events. Private and public sources, categorised by Creswell (2015) as documents, were utilised to substantiate understanding.

### **Data analysis**

For this qualitative study, thematic analysis was the most relevant and appropriate data analysis method. The main statements made by participants were identified and interpreted based on authentic reasoning from the raw data, according to Hunter, McCullum, and Howes (2019). Thematic analysis involves organising, segmenting, and breaking down patterns to draw meaningful conclusions from the data (Hunter et al., 2019). The transcription of the data collected from participants ensued followed by synthesising and combining all relevant information into a cohesive unit. As McMillan and Schumacher (2014) explain, data analysis involves identifying patterns and relationships through categorisation. To analyse the data, the researchers repeatedly listened to the audio recordings and watched the video clips, transcribing each participant's responses verbatim. Then, the four responses from each participant were analysed and information was reassembled accordingly.

### **Ethical considerations**

To ensure the ethical integrity of the research, various research protocols were adhered to. Ethical clearance from the University of South Africa (Unisa) with the reference number 2022/09/07/31362338/13/AM. This allowed the researchers to seek permission to conduct research in two primary schools. Permission was requested from the Limpopo Department of Education (LDoE), providing them with the research proposal and the university's ethical clearance certificate as evidence. Following approval from LDoE, the district senior manager, circuit managers, and school principals in Capricorn South District were contacted, providing them with the necessary documentation to gain entry to the schools. Throughout the research

process, ethical considerations were paramount. Participants were fully informed about the study's aims, nature, and purpose before agreeing to participate. They were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without facing any negative consequences. All participants signed consent forms, confirming their agreement to participate and ensuring their anonymity and confidentiality. Furthermore, they were assured that their data, including the voice recordings and interview responses, would only be accessed by the researcher.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The following section reveals how all the participants responded to the research question namely, what is the impact of Grade R readiness on Grade One teaching?

### **The impact of Grade R readiness on Grade One teaching**

This question was formulated to determine the impact that Grade R readiness has on Grade One teaching; to establish whether the teachers knew how to develop readiness in their classes; to identify if the teachers understood their role; and their use of different strategies, skills, and attitudes in developing readiness in Grade R. The responses from the teachers highlighted both differing and similar strategies and skills that they knew would impact Grade One teaching if they failed to develop them. The following responses emerged:

**P1:** *Grade R readiness impacts negatively on Grade One teachers because it disturbs the progress of the Grade One teacher as Grade R learners are not allowed to fail. If our learners are ready, they should understand how to write between lines starting from left to write. They should be able to grip the pencil, retell simple stories, trace letters and colour in. If the child cannot perform these activities, then the Grade One teacher must start developing readiness because he/she will struggle to continue with Grade One work. This is time-consuming.*

**P2:** *Grade R learners need to have indicators like physical development, social skills, attention, cognitive, and language development to be ready for Grade One. If they're not ready, they may struggle and could end up repeating Grade One.*

**P3:** *If the child is not ready, the child fails to develop his/her milestones in Grade R. The child cannot recognise uppercase and lowercase letters, and struggles to identify shapes, colours, differences, and similarities. The learner cannot memorise the letters in sequence, nor recognise names from left to write patterns. The learner starts writing from right to left, mixing letters because the letters are written on the wall. They cannot write between the lines. Some learners need to remain in Grade R, but the Department wants them to all pass. You find that there are not many like now I have five learners who struggle with whom I think would not make it in Grade One the following year.*

**P4:** *I am aware that Grade R impacts Grade One teaching. Learners leaving Grade R should be able to write and identify numbers 1–10, compare pictures, write words, recognise number patterns, write from left to right, understand symbols, and use*



*concrete apparatus for addition and subtraction. The government's policy of non-failure in Grade R needs to change to ensure learners are fully prepared.*

The responses from the participants indicated that they knew what was expected of them as Grade R teachers – to evade a negative impact on Grade One teaching. Their responses differed according to their understanding of the impact that Grade R can have on Grade One teaching. P1 believed that the impact of Grade R readiness on Grade One teaching has a ripple effect because Grade R learners are not allowed to fail and that disturbs their progress in Grade One. Grade One teachers must start with developing learner readiness because the learners are struggling to cope with Grade One activities as they have not acquired the necessary skills such as understanding how to write between lines, tracing letters, colouring in, gripping a pencil, and retelling stories. Incorporating Grade R activities into the Grade One curriculum is time-consuming and delays Grade One teachers' progress. P4 believes that if the learners are unable to write and identify numbers from 1 to 10, compare pictures, write words from left to right, recognise number patterns, understand symbols, and use concrete apparatus to add and subtract numbers, it will hamper the teaching and learning in Grade One. However, even if they are unprepared, the government policy of non-failure recommends that these learners proceed to Grade One. Hence, P4 recommends that the policy be changed to ensure that the Grade R learners are ready before transiting to Grade One.

According to Kaburi (2019), Grade R plays a critical role in children's educational development by helping them make important strides toward independent learning and emphasising the significance of social skills. Additionally, Niklas and Tayler (2018) confirm that it is the responsibility of kindergartens or preschools to develop learners' science, social, language, fine motor, and creativity skills, as well as competencies in mathematics and literacy. Statements by Kaburi (2019) and Niklas and Tayler (2018) attest that a lack of acknowledged skills in Grade R indeed harms Grade One teaching. Therefore, Wolf and McCoy (2019) found that in Ghana, due to the learning struggles of three- to four-year-olds, the government recommends that learners attend pre-primary school for two years when they are four years old to alleviate the problem of learners' unpreparedness for Grade One.

P2 and P3 concurred that the preparedness of Grade R students greatly influences Grade One instruction. They highlighted the significance of students developing language, social, physical, emotional, and cognitive skills to enable a successful transition to Grade One. They also underlined the necessity of comprehensive development, including perceptual development, during this transition. This finding is consistent with Molteno's advice for teachers to have a profound understanding of how young children learn and interact with their surroundings. Moreover, they highlighted the importance of implementing alternative assessment criteria in Grade R, as specified by CAPS, instead of requiring all students to pass. P3 specifically noted that she had five students in her class who were encountering difficulties and may not have been prepared for Grade One.

Mcilroy (2018) recognises the importance of school readiness as a critical skill for Grade R learners to succeed in Grade One education. In essence, the responses from the participants suggested that learners may struggle to acquire the necessary skills for readiness if their cognitive development and fine motor skills are not fully developed. De Witt, Du Toit, and Franzen (2020), along with support from Davin (2016) and De Witt (2020), argue that school readiness encompasses various developmental aspects such as affective, cultural, cognitive, social, normative, physical, and literacy readiness, aligning with the participant's responses. Additionally, all participants indicated that unprepared Grade R learners transitioning to Grade One have an impact on Grade One education. P1, P2, P3, and P4 recognised that Grade R's lack of retention negatively affects Grade One teaching, despite expressing their concerns and perspectives differently.

The participants appeared to be experiencing frustration because of their concerns. However, according to Excell and Linnington (2018), various obstacles may result in learners not being prepared for Grade R. They emphasise the importance of implementing a play-based approach to learning and teaching that considers children's different developmental stages, ages, and environments. The focus should be on teacher-guided activities to facilitate knowledge construction and inquiry generation. Teachers must consider the child's background and environment and create a relevant and accurate early-learning environment or indoor activities. Guner and Kartal (2019) support the notion that established transition teams should develop support programs for the future. They emphasise the significance of the interaction between families and the school in enhancing successful relationships within the school-family unit and promoting parent partnership to prepare Grade R learners effectively in various aspects. This standpoint is also supported by Dangol and Shrestha (2019), who agree with the participants that learners who lack readiness for learning tend to face challenges in school.

Bush (2019) challenges Angie Motshekga's decision not to retain Grade R. In her Basic Education Budget Speech, Motshekga suggested that the policy of not retaining Grade R students would harm Grade One students as well as Grade Four students. These students are expected to utilise the perceptual skills, understanding of symbols, and reading comprehension that they learned in Grade R, which they failed to master. As a result, their self-esteem will suffer. Yet, the findings corroborate Bush's (2019) critique of Angie Motshekga's policy of not retaining Grade R students who are not ready to advance. The policy, although well-intentioned, may inadvertently set up students for failure by advancing them before they are academically and developmentally prepared. As a result, ensuring that students are truly ready to progress to Grade One is essential for their long-term success and well-being.

### **CONTRIBUTION OF THE STUDY**

The study aimed to gain insight into how the performance quality of Grade R learners influences teaching in Grade One classrooms, particularly among teachers in the Foundation Phase. The study's results offered a new perspective on how Grade R readiness can affect Grade One

teaching in Foundation Phase classes. The conclusions will enable various stakeholders, including the Limpopo Department of Education, senior district managers, circuit managers, curriculum advisors, principals, teachers, and new researchers, to improve and enhance their educational practices and address the challenges faced in Grade R classrooms.

### **RECOMMENDATION AND CONCLUSION**

This research aimed to investigate the impact of Grade R readiness on Grade One instruction. The results of this study indicated that not holding back unprepared Grade R students harms Grade One teaching, especially for students who are not prepared for the transition. Therefore, the policies of the Department of Basic Education (DBE) have an impact on the school system, which in turn affects Grade R and Grade One students. The implementation of DBE policies significantly influences both students and teachers in terms of Grade R readiness. While these policies emphasise quality education, many teachers are not aligned with them. This is because policies are formulated at higher levels, while teachers, who are responsible for implementing the policies, are at the grassroots level. The study highlighted the issue of not holding back Grade R students. The teachers participating in the study identified the Grade R no-repeat policy as a challenge that impacted Grade R readiness and had negative consequences for Grade One. They suggested that if the Department allowed learners to repeat, they could provide more support to help these students transition to Grade One, which would otherwise disrupt the Grade One program. Additionally, parents are not motivated to support their children because they believe that their children will advance to Grade One regardless of readiness. Considering this, it is proposed that Minister Motshekga's idea of having two Grade R classes should be endorsed. This would ensure that students who are not yet ready for Grade One would not have to repeat the first year of Grade R but could instead proceed to a second year of Grade R for additional support and preparation for transitioning to Grade One.

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