

Taking the debate into action: does the current Grade R practice in South Africa meet quality requirements?

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Abstract

Evidenced-based research has shown that the current Grade R implementation in South Africa is fraught with challenges and with what some researchers construe as a misunderstanding of the aims of Grade R education. In response to research and current heated discourse which has emanated from it, this paper poses the question “What is quality Grade R practice in the South African context?” As a conceptual paper, it first explores the contested nature of Grade R and the aims that align with three informing approaches to Grade R practice. We then set out possible indicators of a quality Grade R programme in the South African context and then argue for a particular approach that could begin to realise quality Grade R practice in South Africa today.

Key Words: Grade R, aims of Grade R, quality practice, curriculum, developmental approach, didactic approach, historical-sociocultural approach

Introduction

What is quality Grade R education in the South African context? Answers to this question are fuelling heated discourse among Grade R practitioners, researchers and educators from a wide range of backgrounds. However, while it is important that the talking continues, we also urgently need to decide what will actually constitute quality in Grade R education, as in 2014 Grade R will be a universal¹ South African reality.

Opportunities to attend Grade R will be offered to every child in the relevant age range (Department of Education (DoE), 2001). It is envisaged by the Department of Education (DoE, 2001), that this year before formal schooling will enable our children to develop the skills, knowledge and dispositions that facilitate the optimisation of formal schooling. Quality is key; including a quality curriculum and a quality teacher or practitioner (Scheerens, 1992; Todd & Mason 2005; Christie, 2008; Wood, 2009). According to Christie (2008), the pedagogical decisions a teacher or practitioner makes will determine how the “doors of learning” are opened – creakily or in a way that inspires young learners and maximises their curiosity to make knowledge their own. The questions of exactly how to “open doors”, and the nature of the pedagogical decisions that need to be made, lie at the heart of the current heated discourse. It is these issues that are considered in this conceptual paper, as we explore what kind of Grade R programme could realise the educational vision contained in the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) (DoE, 2002) and the Constitution (RSA,1996) and simultaneously meet the needs of all of South Africa’s children.

¹ In White Paper 5 on Early Childhood Development (ECD) (DoE, 2001) it was stated that by 2010 Grade R would be compulsory for all children. The country was not able to meet this deadline and in a public announcement in February 2010 the president announced that by 2014 Grade R education would become universal for this cohort of children.

There are, as we have indicated, many contested notions of the importance of Grade R education, and notions of what the Grade R year is hoping to achieve and how best to achieve these aims. Importantly, the authors argue, unless we can develop a common Grade R vision, competing and contested ideas may continue to negatively influence the implementation of this year. In order to reach a common vision we suggest that it is imperative to engage in debate with issues such as why we need Grade R, what we hope to achieve through it and what kind of approach will allow us to achieve what we want.² Only once these questions have been extensively debated and some consensus reached by disparate stakeholders in the ECD/FP the education sector, will educationalists be able to engage in depth with the notion of what constitutes a quality Grade R within the South African context.

This paper therefore explores some of the curriculum options that could inform a quality Grade R programme. In doing so, it foregrounds the possible implications of particular pedagogical choices. It is these choices that will impact quality in the South African Grade R context. To capture the elements of the heated discourse, we first unpack the various perspectives which are informing the current debate in the Western world (Anning, Cullen & Flear, 2009; Grieshaber & Cannella, 2001; Mac Naughton, 2003) and which, the authors suggest, are also informing the early learning debate in South Africa. Secondly, we argue for a particular position, namely a historical socio-cultural perspective which, we posit, aligns more closely with our context and our children. Thirdly we consider how this position would inform quality in a Grade R programme.

Why do we need Grade R and what are we hoping to achieve through this year?

The importance of early learning to ensure later academic success is no longer contested (Schweinhart & Weikart, 1993; Heckman, 2003; Riley, 2003; Bruce 2004). However, research has also shown that if intervention is to have beneficial consequences for children's learning and development, it should be of a high quality³ (Schweinhart & Weikart, 1993; Bredekamp & Coppel, 1997, Heckman, 2000; Bruce, 2004). Recognised indicators of quality include physical resources, for example available equipment and classroom size and play area, curriculum choices, school ethos and management as well as learner factors, for example socio-economic background. It is, however, the teacher who is most pivotal in the quest for quality teaching and learning (Scheerens, 1992; Todd & Mason 2005; Christie, 2008). A teacher who is able to turn teaching and learning challenges into opportunities would need an in-depth understanding of the theories which guide practice. One of these theories emphasises how play can be instrumental in supporting both learning and teaching (Anning *et al.*, 2009; Siraj-Blatchford, 2009; Riley, 2003).

This allusion to quality becomes even more important within the South African context because so many children come from disadvantaged and unstimulating environments (DoE, 2001; Schneider & Salojee, 2007). It has been shown that where the home environment is questionable, children are less likely to succeed in formal school (Walker, Wachs, Meeks Gardner, Lozoff, Wasserman & Pollitt, 2007). One

² While the NCS and CAPS documents offer some partial answers to these questions, the authors do not believe that these questions have been rigorously probed within the South African context. Research has shown that there are different interpretations of the NCS and this has resulted in varying forms of implementation of the Grade R curriculum (Wits School of Education (WSoE), 2009; Eastern Cape Department of Education, 2008).

³ Quality is a contested notion. It is a subjective term which should be viewed from multiple perspectives. It is informed by pedagogical practices as well institutional factors and needs to be contextualised and to recognise diversity. The role of the teacher in quality is pivotal.

way of rupturing seemingly predetermined underachievement could be through a quality Grade R programme.

So what exactly is Grade R? At the outset, we stress that Grade R is in some way a homeless construct. It sits with one leg in the preschool and the other in the gateway to formal schooling. It is the first year of the foundation phase and at the same time the last year of the preschool phase. From where does it draw its identity? Our national understanding of the purpose of Grade R will obviously impact the approach adopted. And this approach, in turn, will determine the quality of the foundations laid for the citizens of tomorrow. We cannot effectively consider the link between Grade R and the quality of South African education until we have unpacked the arguments around the kind of Grade R programme that would best serve South Africa today.

Grade R should not be a “watered down” Grade 1 but at the same time it needs to enable children to refine the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes that will stand them in good stead in formal schooling and this is ideally done in an appropriate play-based context (Anning, 1991; Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford & Taggart, 2004). The authors assert that one way to promote a quality Grade R programme is to adopt an approach that brings together some of the aims of preschool education while at the same time adopting an approach that meets some of the demands of the formal schooling system (WSoE, 2009). But what are the aims of preschool education and to what extent should these aims inform Grade R practice?

An important aim of preschool education is preparation for life and a foundation for lifelong learning (Reilly, 1983). A pedagogical approach informed by this aim is underpinned by important tenets such as holistic development of the child and the development of learning dispositions such as perseverance, a sense of responsibility and curiosity. Furthermore, this approach should enable a child to enter Grade 1 ready, willing and able to learn (Gordon & Browne, 2008; Spodek, & Saracho, 2006; Carr, 2001). In addition, as Carr (2001) has shown, a child exhibiting these dispositions is most likely to succeed in formal schooling. It is this preschool aim the authors argue that should predominately inform South Africa’s approach to the Grade R year.

But as research has revealed (Anning *et al.*, 2009; Gordon & Browne, 2008; Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999), not only the aims of Grade R but also the implementation of these is contested. For instance, there are stakeholders in the current discourse – including principals, parents and certain educators – who support a more didactic approach, or what Anning (1991) refers to as an instrumentalist or utilitarian approach. In other words, the main aim of the Grade R programme should be the preparation for Grade 1. In this approach, the focus is on the three R’s, namely reading, writing and arithmetic. Curriculum design is informed by “readiness perceptions” of teachers and other educationalists in higher grades. In addition, Anning (1991) contends that the curriculum is partly driven by parental expectations based on their lack of understanding of what constitutes quality Grade R practice. Emanating from this is parental pressure to introduce a more formal approach with emphasis on the “three R’s” as soon as possible (Anning, 1991).

Furthermore, in a South African context, practitioners are interpreting the curriculum possibilities inherent in the NCS in a very limited way (WSoE, 2009). Practitioners’ limited interpretation combined with parental pressure has resulted in many of the practitioners experiencing a lack of agency and being unable to voice their frustrations in the educational context (WSoE, 2009). What we would see as the

negative element in this didactic or utilitarian approach is that it does not take sufficient account of the aims articulated in the preschool perspective (Anning, 1991; Anning, 2006).

We suggest that we should be striving to meet more than the “preparation for Grade 1” aim. We should not ignore elements integral to the preschool perspective, such as preparation for life through holistic development and the promotion of specific learning dispositions. Research shows that if these aims are addressed, children appear to be able to cope more successfully in primary school – in other words, they have acquired the underpinning knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that will enable them to cope with the demands of a more structured education phase (Carr, 2001; Riley, 2003; Bruce, 2004; Siraj-Blatchford, 2009).

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

Different approaches that could be adopted

There are different educational approaches which are closely aligned with the above-mentioned aims. Three major approaches to early childhood education (ECE)/Grade R practice, all of which come from a Western world perspective, tend to inform Grade R pedagogy in South Africa. Each of these approaches draws on specific theoretical positions. We use the term ECE/Grade R because current research (Riley, 2003; Bruce, 2004; Anning *et al.*, 2009) emphasises that Grade R should, while having its own identity, be aligned with ECE pedagogical practice. It should not be seen as a “mini Grade 1”.

The three approaches to which the authors refer are firstly a pedagogical approach informed predominantly by developmental psychology; secondly a historical socio-cultural approach, and thirdly a didactic or instrumentalist approach. Each approach will be outlined below.

The pedagogical approach is informed predominantly by developmental psychology and highlights developmental norms (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Gordon & Browne, 2008). This has become the dominant ECE model and informs what is commonly referred to as developmentally appropriate practice (DAP). However, in recent years, this approach has been criticised by many contemporary early childhood researchers (Grieshaber & Cannella, 2001; Cannella & Viruru, 2004; Mac Naughton, 2003; Mac Naughton, 2005). They argue that this approach could result in a deficit model which sees the child as having to achieve certain norms at a certain age. This could result in an interpretation of the child’s achievements which is narrow and lacks insight into the importance of context and conditions of possibility for teaching and learning. In other words, it supports the notion of a universal child (Dahlberg *et al.*, 1999). We are not saying that developmental norms should be ignored but, as Walsh (2005) asserts, they are necessary but not sufficient. They need to be complemented with contemporary understanding of the pedagogical importance of children’s socio-cultural contexts. It appears however, that South Africa’s Grade R policy as articulated in White Paper no. 5 on ECD is mainly based on DAP (DoE, 2001) with insufficient cognisance being taken of socio-cultural contextual factors.

This leads us to a second approach that takes into account socio-cultural contexts and differing understandings of young children and how they best learn. This approach has recently been termed a historical socio-cultural approach (Anning *et al.*, 2009) and draws heavily on Vygotskyian and NeoVygotskyian theory and post-structural, feminist and post-colonial theories as well as critical theory. This approach is, we argue, particularly relevant to South Africa because it takes cognisance of a wide

range of historical, political, socio-cultural and economic contexts. It also highlights the importance of the teacher as the co-constructor of knowledge. As co-constructor s/he requires a wide knowledge base so that his/her mediation can touch on deep, meaningful and relevant issues in relation to South Africa's vision of democracy as set out in the Constitution (RSA, 1996) and NCS (DoE, 2002). There is a pivotal role for the teacher as co-constructor of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values in both teacher-guided activities and play.

Approaches 1 and 2 emphasise the importance of play in early learning, albeit from different perspectives. Though both perspectives require that the teacher has a deep understanding of play as a purposeful and stimulating activity, the limitations and possibilities inherent in each perspective are different. Both perspectives focus on learning through play but it is the historical socio-cultural perspective that makes explicit the link between play and teaching. Wood (2009) addresses this in her construct of a pedagogy of play. In a pedagogy of play, a teacher, as co-constructor, demonstrates her in-depth understanding of the possibilities that arise spontaneously from the multi-faceted and complex nature of play. Not only does s/he maximise "teachable moments" but s/he also structures the play opportunities to ensure that both learning and *teaching* occur. Mediated activity in the context of play demonstrates a teacher's awareness of contextual sensitivity and cultural "norms" as s/he, for example, considers whose culture is being privileged and whose is being marginalised in her choice of resource material (Wood, 2009).

The third approach is one that South African research (WSoE, 2009) and research elsewhere (Anning, 1991; Nias 1987) has shown is persistently pervasive but not essentially pedagogically sound as an approach towards early years teaching and learning. This is an approach that, in the main, focuses on "academics" – i.e. reading, writing and arithmetic – and tries to establish numeracy and literacy through a more didactic practice which favours table-top activities such as worksheets and other largely "inactive" activities (Anning, 1991; Gordon & Browne, 2008). In our view, it does not take sufficient cognisance of how young children learn. In young children's learning, the internalisation of concepts is facilitated by a three phase approach: children first experience these concepts kinaesthetically (i.e. through movement), then three dimensionally (through exploring with concrete apparatus) and only then through pen and paper activities (Charlesworth, 2004; Saracho & Spodek, 2006).

The more didactic approach has in all probability been influenced by an incomplete understanding by practitioners of the developmental approach (Anning, 1991). Practitioners do not necessarily accept or support the didactic approach. But, faced with parental, school and educational policy demands⁴, and, in a number of cases, limited insight into how to enhance children's learning, practitioners feel pressurised to implement this more formal approach which is an aspect to which we have already referred.

Each of the three approaches calls for something different from the system, the teacher and the child. So, as stated in the beginning, we need to enter into a robust debate around the type of ECE/Grade R approach that should be adopted.

Research worldwide (Anning *et al.*, 2009; Yelland, 2005; Mac Naughton, 2003; Siraj-Blatchford & Clarke, 2000), points to an approach which embraces diversity, includes the socio-cultural contexts of all stakeholders and highlights the importance of play. It is also evident that we cannot simply "import"

⁴ The implementation of assessment policy (DoE, 2008) would be an example of these demands.

Eurocentric pedagogical principles without interrogating their suitability for a South African Grade R programme. Our realities are not theirs.

Pathway to quality practice

We need to explore, through the context of debate, what would comprise a South African set of quality Grade R indicators. This paper has set out some of these indicators. We also need to explore the role of the teacher as a co-constructor of learning, as his or her practice, as already stated, lies at the heart of effective or high quality pedagogy (Christie, 2008). This is as applicable to ECE as it is to all the other phases in education.

A further consideration that should form an integral part of a high quality programme is the mediation of “reasonableness” (Burbules, 1994). We would like to introduce “reasonableness” as a learning disposition that would support lifelong learning, an important aim of the preschool perspective. By reasonableness we are referring to attributes of character that begin to develop in early childhood, or that fail to develop because of a wide range of socialisation, pedagogical and other factors. In using the term “reasonableness”, we are referring to a child’s ability to give **good** reasons for their opinions. This is the child’s ability to, unconsciously perhaps, counter bias and prejudice through responsive listening – listening and responding to the ideas of others, adults and children, and starting to listen to themselves. Story books and other stimuli are used to generate responsive listening and collaborative enquiry (thinking together) as children step back from self and reflect on what they are saying and how they are saying it.

Because of the pivotal role of the teacher in ensuring quality teaching and learning (Broadfoot, Osborn, Gilly & Bûcher, 1993), the question that must now be asked is what kind of practitioner is required to implement the high quality approach that is described here. We would suggest that this approach requires a practitioner who is capable, confident and well informed about holistic child development. Furthermore s/he must be aware of and be able to accommodate children coming from varied economic and socio-cultural contexts and has a deep understanding of what constitutes high quality Grade R practice. This understanding calls for a practitioner who is skilled and well-informed in relation to the co-construction of knowledge and sustained sharing thinking with children (Anning *et. al.*, 2009; Siraj-Blatchford, 2009). As a quality co-constructor of learning, a practitioner needs to develop excellent dialogue and questioning skills as well as the motivation to research and find out more about the content with which s/he is dealing (Jordan, 2009). S/he must be prepared to admit to the children when s/he doesn’t know something or is wrong, possibly, in his/her current understanding, and then construct joint problem-solving tasks to find the answer (Jordan, 2009).

This understanding of quality may require teachers to rethink their pedagogical assumptions and reflect on their ideas about children, how they learn and opportunities for teaching through play (Podmore, 2009). This would require curricular flexibility. Furthermore, s/he may also need to reconsider assessment strategies and school/family partnerships. But these attributes are not the focus of this paper and will not be discussed in further detail here.

How far are we along this path?

Although we are aware that there are centres of pedagogical excellence in South Africa, the general pattern is disturbing (Eastern Cape Department of Education, 2008; South African Institute for Distance

Education (SAIDE), 2010; WSoE, 2009). Research has shown that many Grade R practitioners are under-qualified and lack status (Eastern Cape Department of Education, 2008; SAIDE, 2010; WSoE, 2009). In Gauteng, research evidence points to Grade R practitioners having insufficient support from school management teams, school principals and Heads of Departments (HoDs) (WSoE, 2009). This research study (WSoE, 2009) found that this lack of support could, in part, be attributed to a general limited understanding of the unique requirements of Grade R and the fact that it should not be a “watered down” Grade 1. Furthermore, it was found that even the practitioners themselves have a limited understanding of high quality practice (WSoE, 2009). They lack sufficient insight and layered understanding of appropriate practice as well as the impact of contextual factors. Furthermore, their understanding of the range of possibilities in relation to rich language usage as well as the optimisation of learning and teaching support materials (LTSM) and assessment is limited (WSoE, 2009). In addition, there is evidence of minimal understanding of how to implement meaningful play that can enhance learning both indoors and outdoors (WSoE, 2009). Practitioners also pay insufficient attention to opportunities for the implicit and explicit promotion of values inherent in the NCS, for example respect. In other words, they are not using the NCS as the rich resource which it could be if a practitioner has sufficient insight into its possibilities.

This links to our earlier contention about practitioners interpreting the NCS in a narrow context. At best, the NCS is used as a prescriptive tool to lay the foundations for the “three R’s” – reading, writing and arithmetic – without taking sufficient cognisance of other indicators of quality teaching and learning. As mentioned above, one of these is the promotion of what is referred to as the fourth R, “reasonableness”, as a learning disposition.

The way forward

We argue that the implementation of a quality Grade R programme lies in the adoption of a historical socio-cultural informing perspective. This would help counter the narrow interpretation of the NCS and guard against a similar pitfall when the Curriculum Assessment and Policy Statement (CAPS), the successor of the NCS, is introduced in 2012 (Department of Basic Education (DBE), 2010). CAPS, like the NCS, will require quality teachers if it is to achieve its aims. These teachers should be able to:

- Demonstrate an in-depth understanding of how children learn through insight into the many theoretical perspectives that inform ECE.
- Create an appropriate early learning environment.
- Be sensitive to contextual and other factors.
- Implement an appropriate and purposeful play-based Grade R programme where play is used to enhance learning and teaching.
- Use teacher-guided activities to generate enquiry and the co-construction of knowledge.
- Align developmental milestones with professional practice that is age and stage appropriate and does not privilege some learners while marginalising others.
- Implement appropriate assessment strategies.
- Focus on issues relating to diversity and social justice.
- Mediate learning and reflect on their practice.

In conclusion, this paper has considered the question “What is quality Grade R practice in the South African context” and in so doing added a particular position to the current discourse. We have argued that Grade R practice can and should be conceptualised in ways other than those currently being

implemented, and that this can be done within the framework of the NCS and its successor CAPS and the vision of citizenship contained in these documents. However, it will take quality Grade R practice, informed by a pedagogy of play that is sensitive to contextual and other factors, to actualise such a Grade R programme. Furthermore, it will take a practitioner who meets the quality indicators articulated in this paper. With Grade R poised to become a universal South African reality, we must move the current debate into action.

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