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Exploring the Quality and Inequality in the Literacy Development Opportunities of South African Preschoolers

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Abstract

According to the South African Constitution and Bill of Rights, with their emphasis on a culture of civil liberties and the democratic values of liberty, equality and human rights, the country's education system should be inherently capable of meeting the diverse needs of every child and preventing the breakdown and exclusion of any learner. In reality, however, the South African education system fails to address the literacy needs of many South African children. National literacy surveys suggest that the country is 'headed for a national education crisis' (Bloch, 2009:12), because we 'barely produce literate and numerate children'. Against this disturbing background, we need to gain an understanding of teachers' practices and the quality of language and literacy input currently being offered in early childhood education in South Africa. While remaining constantly aware of the interplay of various intrinsic and extrinsic factors that affect literacy development, two main objectives guided this research. Firstly, we aimed to investigate the quality of language and literacy stimulation programmes currently being offered at 195 randomly selected urban and rural preschool classes in the Free State province, South Africa (via the administration of the ECERS-R). Secondly, we conducted focus groups with 50 preschool teachers to explore the challenges they experience in creating classroom environments that are responsive to the literacy needs of South African preschoolers. Moreover, we attempted to identify and address the inequalities that still exist with regard to the literacy development of the vast number of South African learners who are still at risk of developing literacy and academic problems and consequently even now experience exclusion daily. Results from the literacy project have already made a significant contribution to the meagre corpus of empirically validated research in the literacy challenges facing South African children. With this article, we intend to stimulate debate on a topic of critical importance to the country's education system.

Introduction

During the past two decades early childhood research has emphasized the connection between the quality of early child care amongst preschoolers and the developmental outcomes of the child during his or her later school years (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Early Child Care Research Network, 2005). In line with this, recent research has been characterised by renewed attention to the importance of the early childhood development (ECD) policies and services in the world's wealthiest and most industrialised countries, whilst also witnessing unprecedented efforts to place ECD policies on the national development agenda of developing countries of the world such as countries in sub-Saharan Africa, including South Africa (Burchinal, Kainz & Cai, 2011; Shonkoff, Richter, Van der Gaag & Bhutta, 2012).

Research has shown that children who attend higher quality preschool centres are inclined to start school with higher levels of linguistic, cognitive, and social skills and engage in more complex activities with peers (Logan & Sumsion, 2010). In addition, it has been observed that children's access to sufficient economic and social resources, includ-

ing family income, social support, and health care can be linked to better (or improved) school performance (Logan & Sumsion, 2010). This has specific implications for many children from socio-economically 'at risk' backgrounds which, in the majority of cases, also extend to the schools they attend – namely schools that are challenged by poverty, and that cannot meet the basic educational needs of children due to a lack of resources, insufficiently trained educators, parents with low literacy levels and high levels of unemployment, as well as a shortage of books and other learning materials in their homes and communities (Holmes & Kiernan, 2013).

Focusing on the South African education context, statistics have shown that although the average percentage for home language in Grade 3 (final stage of the foundation phase) shows a slight improvement, it is still very weak with an average score of only 56% (Department of Basic Education, 2014). This is further corroborated by researchers' viewpoints that the current literacy crisis in South Africa is the consequence of insufficient early child care and a lack of quality programmes to sufficiently prepare pre-schoolers during the important emergent literacy stage (Albino & Berry, 2013; Van Staden, 2011). As mentioned earlier (see, Logan & Sumsion, 2010) quality early childhood education is a promising way to overcome the current 'loss of developmental potential' affecting over 200 million children in developing countries (Ishimine & Tayler, 2014; Aboud & Hossain, 2011). For this reason, it is critical to acquire insight into the teachers' methodologies and the quality of the ways in which language and literacy are currently being offered in early childhood education internationally as well as in South Africa (Department of Basic Education & UNICEF, 2009).

In exploring the quality of early language and literacy development of South African preschoolers and the subsequent challenges teachers encounter to create quality teaching and learning conditions the author in the present study draw on several related theories. Firstly, we consider social constructivist perspectives, which view knowledge not as information that is passively received and absorbed (in isolation) but rather as learning that has been built up by the individual, through active participation in the learning process with significant others from the wider community and within the classroom (teachers and peers) (Vygotsky, 1978). Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory provide an additional theoretical 'lens' to better understand the complex interaction between individual learners and their contexts (e.g. family, school, peer group, community). In terms of the pedagogical parameters of this research it implies that any of these contexts may impede or support the language and literacy development of preschool children in the present study.

Method

Study design and Sampling

We employed a multi-method research approach in order to explore the quality of early language and literacy instruction currently being offered at pre-school classes/centres in the Free State province. The study was conducted between January 2013 and June 2014 and involved 195 randomly selected preschool classes drawn from five districts of the Free State province, South Africa, namely Xhariep, Motheo, Lejweleputswa, Thabo Mofutsanyana and Fezile Dabi. In total, 138 urban and 57 rural classes were sampled and 50 preschool teachers were interviewed. This research was approved by both the Free State Department of Education, as well as the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education (UFS-EDU-2013-0074) and the National Research Foundation of South Africa (grant number: 87728). As part of the process of informed consent, written consent was sought from the principals and educators of the participating schools, including the parents of children participating in this study.

Materials and Procedures

The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised (ECERS-R), developed by Harms, Clifford and Cryer (2005) was selected to assess the quality of early language and literacy stimulation programmes. The ECERS-R is an observational tool which entails both quantitative (Likert-scale scores, varying from 1-7) as well as qualitative data-gathering procedures, via classroom observations and the recording of field notes of teacher-learner interaction. All of the rated scores are grouped into four categories, namely: Inadequate (1-2); Minimal (3-4); Good (5-6); and Excellent (7). With regard to its reliability, the internal consistency of the subscales ranged between 0.71 and 0.88, and that of the total score was 0.92. The ECERS-R comprises six subscales, namely *Space and Furnishings*; *Personal Care Routines*; *Language Reasoning*; *Activities*; *Interaction*; *Programme Structure* (Harms et al., 2005). In this paper we report results of the *Language Reasoning* (Books and pictures; Encouraging children to communicate; Using language to develop reasoning skills and Informal use of language) and *Activities* (Dramatic play) subscales. In addition to the ECERS-R, socio-demographic information was gathered with a supplementary questionnaire to obtain information about the qualifications and training of teachers; language of instruction; their level of satisfaction with the support they receive from the Department of Education (DOE) and the challenges they encounter.

Procedures

Prior to this investigation, the principal researcher trained 48 honours students to administer the ECERS-R. Students visited the schools in groups of two or three. After each visit the ratings were compared and the differences discussed in the group, led by the principal researcher. These measures ensured mutual understanding of the scale items, including addressing any clarification with regard to scoring the ECERS-R. The

Statistical Package for Social Sciences (IBM SPSS, Version 22, 2013) was used in the analysis of the quantitative data. Data analysis of qualitative data was structured around interpretation of field and diary notes, supported by interview (focus group) transcripts, with cross-reference and participant verification, followed by the identification of main/sub-themes and discussion of emerging findings.

Results and Discussion

Results obtained via a biographical questionnaire have shown that the language of instruction in the majority of the schools that were sampled was Sesotho (46%), followed by Afrikaans (29%), English (19%) and ‘other African languages’ (6%). With regard to socio-economic status, the majority of sampled classes were in poorer communities (54%); whilst 26% had an average socio-economic standing, and 20% of the schools were situated in more affluent communities (above-average). The number of children being accommodated in the classrooms varied from a ratio of 20:1 to 35:1; whilst more than 20% of these classes were catering for more than 35 children per teacher. When one considers the teachers’ qualifications, results from this study have shown that only 27% of the preschool teachers that were sampled were qualified to teach ECD; 11% were unqualified; 45% received NGO training; whilst 12% received no training; and 5% of the participants have other qualifications (i.e., non-ECD qualifications, for example in the senior phase of education, social work, etc.)¹. One of the questions in the biographical questionnaire addressed teachers’ levels of satisfaction with regard to the support they receive from the DOE. The majority of participants indicated that they were not satisfied with the guidance and support they received from DOE officials (60%). Other needs and concerns that were expressed by teachers included ‘the need for more training’; ‘the over-crowded classrooms’; ‘insufficient learning material’ and ‘lack of parental support’.

¹ ‘Under Qualified’ refers to teachers who were trained at technical/teacher training colleges: Matriculation/ Grade 12 +2 years;

‘Qualified’ refers to teachers who are qualified primary school educators: Matriculation/Grade 12+3 years and more;

‘Non-ECD qualification’ refers to a qualification in specialisations such as nursing and social work; or a senior phase teaching qualification, thus not a primary school education qualification.

Table 1
Summary of observations using ECERS-R to assess language and literacy opportunities amongst early-childhood classes in the Free State province (score distribution, N = 195)

	Inadequate (1-2)	Minimal (3-4)	Good (5-6)	Excellent (7)
Language-Reasoning				
Books and pictures	56.5%	7%	11.5%	25%
Encouraging children to communicate	42%	18.5%	13%	26.5%
Using language to develop reasoning skills	47%	12%	8%	33%
Informal use of language	45%	13%	12%	30%
Activities				
Dramatic play	47.5%	16%	18.5%	18%

Books and Pictures

Table 1 represents the average percentages of classroom scores in each of the five ECERS subscales included in this study (listed from inadequate to excellent). With regard to *Books and Pictures*, the majority of children did not have sufficient exposure to books and pictures (inadequate: 56.5%; minimal: 7%). This concern is further corroborated by field-notes of the observers, as well as comments made by teachers during the school visits. One participant from a rural school remarked:

Most of our parents are unemployed and cannot afford to pay school fees. The department subsidises every child that is enrolled but the money is not enough even to cater for the needs of one child. This is not sufficient to buy story books and learning material. We have a mobile library (small bus) that comes along perhaps twice a year, but this is not satisfactory at all. I have to buy books myself and with my salary that is difficult.

Chi-square statistical analyses revealed a significant difference between socio-economic status, with schools in poorer communities experiencing many more challenges than more affluent schools in catering for the needs of preschool children ($p < 0.0001$).

Encouraging Children to Communicate

Results in Table 1 indicate that 42% of pre-primary teachers did not adequately encourage children to communicate; whilst 18.5% only managed to score a rating of ‘minimal’. One of the key challenges occurred in classes where language barriers existed, for example where the teacher was either not fluent in the LOLT of the school or in the case of children being instructed in either their second or third languages. Among the key positive experiences that were noted, was the case of a specific school where the principal invited the taxi drivers who brought the children to school each day to act as ‘translators’ during the first session of the day when children had the opportunity to share their news/experience with the whole class. In sharp contrast to the above, some teachers were not even able to have short conversations with some of the children whose home languages were different from the LOLT of the school. The observations above are further verified by Chi-square statistics which showed significant differences for the different language groups and with poorer schools doing worse than affluent schools ($p = 0.01$).

Using Language to Develop Reasoning Skills

Similarly to the previous subscale, ECERS-R observers’ ratings revealed that nearly 60% of the teachers did not use language effectively to develop the reasoning skills of pre-schoolers (inadequate: 47%; minimal: 12%). This was especially challenging when classes were bigger. Since the majority of the classes did not have classroom assistants, the teachers had a mammoth task during structured and free-play activities not only to facilitate the teaching and learning in the classroom but also to ensure the general safety and well-being of each child on the playground. One teacher commented:

Because the children’s’ home language is different than the language spoken at school, the children really suffer, not only cognitively but also emotionally and some of them become socially withdrawn. Since I am not fluent in their home language, it is difficult to find the words to encourage them to communicate in their home language and share their thoughts and experiences with the class.

This is also supported by Chi-square statistics which yielded significant differences for classes who were overcrowded and catered for more than 35 children per class ($p < 0.0001$).

Informal Use of Language

The ECERS-R subscale ‘informal use of language’ refers to and measures the language used in staff-child and child-child interactions during structured and free play situations. ECERS-R ratings revealed that 45% of teachers did not use language effectively to communicate informally; whilst 13% of the classes received a rating of ‘minimal’. This was especially challenging in bigger classrooms where the use of language was ‘restricted’ to a monologue, which mainly entailed one-way communication of instructions

and or an explanation of the task at hand by the class teacher. Moreover, in many classes, children's talking was discouraged for much of the day to 'improve the discipline in the classrooms' as communicated by the following Grade R teacher:

I have more than forty children in my classroom – this makes individual attention and communication very challenging. Even free-play situations are challenging since my class is next to the Grade one and two classes, and since we do multi-grade teaching in our school it is very disturbing to the other teachers and children who have to concentrate when we have free-play sessions.

Statistical analyses corroborated the discussions and observations above, with overcrowded classrooms' having a significant impact on the informal usage of language and staff-child and child-child interactions ($p < 0.0001$).

Dramatic Play

From Table 1 is clear that the vast majority of children were not adequately exposed to dramatic play material, props, fantasy and leisure items (inadequate: 47.5%; minimal: 16%). The majority of classrooms did not have a dramatic play area. In some cases play materials and fantasy clothes were taken outside during free play sessions. The representation of cultural diversity and people of disabilities were lacking in the majority of classrooms. A female teacher responded as follows:

Dolls and fantasy clothes are few, really very old or broken. We do not have sufficient funds to buy new material to enhance dramatic play in the classroom. This is really a pity as many children also do not have access to these items in their homes.

In support of the discussions and field notes reported above, chi-square statistics yielded significant results for school demarcation with classes in poorer socio-economic areas having numerous challenges ($p < 0.0001$).

Focus Group Discussions

In focusing on the main challenges that the teachers experience, the following themes were identified during the focus group discussions and in the records of field notes, namely socio-economic challenges, school- and home-related factors. Although many of the issues and challenges that were identified overlap, these three main themes will be discussed separately.

Socio-Economic Challenges

Teachers were specifically concerned about the poor socio-economic and home circumstances of many children. It was noted that some children do not have enough food or sufficient clothing and that the feeding schemes at many of the schools provided the only meal some children received daily. Some of the children also did not have basic transport to the school and walked three or more kilometres to attend school each day. A very positive gesture in some areas entailed the outreach to and 'adoption' of a less privileged school by a more affluent school(s). In such instances the 'buddy' school supported them with 'old' library books, learning material, clothing for the children and

food packages for the very needy.

School and Teaching Factors

Some teachers expressed their concerns with regard to issues such as over-crowded classrooms and how this negatively affects the teaching and learning environments. In addition, many children do not participate actively in classroom activities as a result of language barriers. This is because the language of instruction is sometimes only the second or third language the child acquires and is not spoken at home. Many teachers expressed the need for further training in aspects related to language and literacy development. Many of them were not familiar with the precursors that are important and should be addressed during the preparation phase for formal literacy development, such as phonological awareness; how to effectively develop vocabulary in a first or second language; how to develop emergent reading and writing skills and numerous other developmental milestones that should be reached. In cases where teachers were familiar with these concepts, they commented that many children do not acquire these skills at home, leaving the class teacher with an enormous task to thoroughly prepare these children prior to formal schooling. In general teachers expressed the need for more training and workshops to assist them in acquiring the necessary skills to effectively develop preschoolers language and emergent literacy.

Home-Related Challenges

Teachers shared their concerns about the lack of parental involvement – this was a general issue that was raised irrespective of the socio-economic status of the family. Some teachers mentioned that, in the case of poorer families, many parents are not able to attend schools functions or meetings because they have to travel very long distances to and from their workplaces. Other parents' working hours also do not allow them to always attend initiatives organised by the school. A general concern that was raised and which seems to be universal is that in most cases it is usually the parents of children with learning problems who do not attend school meetings and functions. As mentioned previously, additional home challenges include poverty, the home language being different from the LOLT of the school, parents who are not literate themselves and parents who are unemployed and cannot provide in the basic needs of their children.

Conclusions

The research in the current study investigated two broad issues: firstly, it explored the quality of early language and literacy programmes currently being offered at 195 randomly selected preschool centres/classes in the Free State province, South Africa. Secondly, it investigated the challenges facing preschool teachers in order to create suitable environments that are conducive for the effective development of the literacy of preschool children. These aims were pursued by using a multi-method research design which included administering the ECERS-R, observing classroom activities, recording

field notes as well as undertaking focus group discussions with 50 preschool teachers.

From the results, it is evident that at present there is still a dichotomy in the support and infrastructure granted to early childhood development in established classes/settings in our province. Although conditions have improved significantly in post-apartheid South Africa, with more pre-schoolers now having access to ECD centres and Grade R classes, in reality very little has changed and patterns of inequality are still evident – with an estimated 58% of children in South Africa living in poverty (Albino & Berry, 2013). This has a detrimental effect on their health, as well as on their cognitive, emotional and social well-being. The above contrast is still clearly defined along racial and geographic lines, with statistics showing that two-thirds of African children continue to live in poverty when compared to the children from other racial groups in our country, such as Coloured (30%), Indian (8%) and White (2%) children (Albino & Berry, 2013).

The present study revealed that patterns of these inequalities were also present in the classes and centres that were sampled, especially in terms of the inadequate infrastructure, the basic needs of children that are not being met, the teacher to child ratio (class size), the capacity and training of the teachers and the shortage of quality learning support materials to effectively develop the language and literacy skills of preschoolers in poorer communities. Moreover, the results from the present study also corroborate previous research on preschool education in South Africa: they both confirm and raise numerous concerns about the inadequate provision of quality language stimulation, especially where preschoolers are being instructed in a language that is not their home language (for example in English) (Viviers, Biersteker & Moruane, 2013; Van Staden, 2011; Du Plessis & Louw, 2008). The results have also confirmed that many of the teachers who use English as their medium of instruction also struggle to express themselves because English is not their first language. This means that teaching basic concepts in English (including the developmental or pre-literacy skills that are important pre-cursors for the development of the English language and literacy) is very taxing for them. Consequently many preschoolers do not reach their full potential. It is therefore imperative that teachers in multilingual classrooms should not only be sensitive to the cultural and linguistic needs of their learners but also be committed to a multicultural approach to teaching and learning which inter alia entails additional training and language competency in the language of instruction, including a basic knowledge of the children's home language and how to adapt the language and literacy curriculum to ensure that it is culturally more relevant and appropriate to accommodate all children (Du Plessis & Louw, 2008; Van Staden, 2011). Ultimately, ECD is everyone's responsibility – including that of the government, the private sector and businesses, communities, families and civil society at large – all of which have an obligation to improve the lives of young children in South Africa (Albino & Berry, 2013). For this reason it is essential that the Departments of Basic Education and Social Welfare, NGOs and all other stakeholders should work together to equalise the early childhood education conditions

in all communities, especially in the schools in poorer communities. This would ensure a fair and socially just distribution of infrastructure and resources. Moreover, effective systems should be in place to support ECD teachers (for example through in-service training, on-site visits and workshops). It is also urgent that the DOE should liaise with other departments like Social Welfare, NGOs and tertiary institutions to train, support, mentor and empower early childhood teachers. South Africa therefore needs political commitment and effective early childhood intervention strategies and systems in place to identify and support the preschoolers who are most vulnerable. In doing so, we can break down the intergenerational cycle of poverty that is still so evident in our country and ensure equal and quality teaching and learning environments and equal opportunities for all children in South Africa (Albino & Berry, 2013; Richter et al., 2012). To conclude, the following quote seems appropriate:

... a promising future belongs to those nations that invest wisely in their young citizens.

(Shonkoff et al., 2012:2)

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