



Early childhood development educators' perceptions of learners' readiness for Grade R

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Background: Early childhood is a formative period during which distinguishable development has projections of bearing desirable outcomes within an individual. Hence, physical, language, cognitive, emotional and social independence are healthy components of a typical child's development that early childhood development (ECD) educators deem essential for Grade R readiness.

Aim: This article aims to explore ECD educators' perceptions of typical 4-year-old learners' aspects of development and how this supports their readiness for Grade R.

Setting: This study was conducted in an ECD centre in a marginalised rural context of the Mandlankala area, Empangeni, north of Zululand.

Methods: An interpretive qualitative case study methodological design framed within Bronfenbrenner's person-proximal processes-context model was adopted. Purposive convenient sampling was used to select three ECD educators from an ECD centre. Semi-structured interviews and learners' physical, language, cognitive, emotional and social behaviour observations were used to generate data. Data were analysed thematically.

Results: Findings revealed that early childhood educators perceive 4-year-old learners' readiness for Grade R differently based on criteria such as their personalities based on developmental milestones and the educator's experience in the field and training.

Conclusion: This study concluded that the learner's level of physical, language, cognitive, emotional and social development influences their readiness for Grade R.

Contribution: School readiness skills allow school teachers to expand and further develop learners' skills in the specific areas of social interaction, play, language, emotional development, physical skills, literacy and fine motor skills.

Keywords: early childhood development; early childhood development educators; Grade R; parental involvement; school readiness.

Introduction

Four-year-old learners are expected to be able to perform several chores both independently and with adult supervision (Department of Basic Education [DBE] 2015). These can be personal or family chores. The former includes making their bed, getting dressed, packing up personal belongings, like toys after use, and washing hands with minimal parental help. Generally, in many households, the latter include washing dishes with parental supervision, helping a parent carry lighter groceries, preparing food, sorting colours for laundry and matching socks after the clothing is washed and dried. According to Klein and Goodwin (2013), performing these age-appropriate day-to-day chores acts as precursors for language, emotional, cognitive and physical (fine and gross motor) skills development that is required in performing Grade R activities, which include engaging with the educator and peers, opening lunch boxes, drawing or standing to pull up pants and other related tasks. Thus, parental involvement in cultivating diverse development abilities in children is critical, as it can substantially impact their social, emotional, intellectual and physical development. However, some parents are passive in their child's education, and some are not directly involved in their child's upbringing, which can undermine the laws and policies that protect children's well-being. South Africa has various laws and policies that protect children's well-being, such as the *Children's Act 38 of 2005*, which emphasises providing children with essential care, safety and support to ensure their full potential development (Sapungan & Sapungan 2014).

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The sensitivity and critical implications of early childhood years are reinforced by the understanding that language, cognitive, social, emotional and many other development skills are established (Zeng et al. 2017). In order to support the primacy of early learning, the National Development Plan of 2012 recognised early childhood development (ECD) as 'a top priority among the measures to improve the quality of education and long-term prospects of future generations' (National Planning Commission 2013:71). This programme aimed to expose at least 75% of South Africa's 4- and 5-year-old learners to formal early childhood care and education (ECCE) by 2024 (Kotzé 2015). Therefore:

[L]earners need access to good-quality care and education programmes outside the home as they are important in providing children with the basic cognitive, emotional, social and language skills they need to flourish in school. (Blair & Raver 2015:713)

This article, consequently, aims to explore ECD educators' understandings of typical 4-year-old learners' aspects of development and how this supports their readiness for Grade R. Fundamentally, ECD educators are responsible for the early education of children in their care, which includes discovering their schedules, training them on how to follow daily routine and practice essential cleanliness and designing entertaining and informative activities for young children. The study was driven by a critical research question: 'What are ECD educators' perceptions of 4-year-old learners' readiness for Grade R?'

In South Africa, Grade R is the year before learners start formal schooling (DBE 2011; Janse van Rensburg 2015; Excell & Linington 2015). Blair and Raver (2015) uphold that school readiness is the product of integrated developmental processes at the biological and behavioural levels shaped by the contexts in which development occurs. Although children have diverse developmental milestones, namely neurotypical and typical, which are influenced by their biological and behavioural levels (Excell & Linington 2015), this study focused primarily on the typical developmental milestones of 4-year-old learners and their readiness for Grade R.

Theoretical framing

Based on the understanding, a theory can be described as a general framework that comprises organised ideas that can be used to explain certain behaviours and observations, which may result in the discovery of new phenomena and connections (Creswell & Creswell 2017). Yielding from this notion, the researchers considered Bronfenbrenner's person-proximal processes-context and time (PPCT) model relevant to frame the study. The PPCT model stems from Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory (1979). In the PPCT model, proximal processes are progressively complex reciprocal interactions between a person and his or her environment, which 'must occur on a fairly regular basis over extended periods' (Bronfenbrenner 1995:620). The model maintains that child development comprises a multi-layered set of systems, hence the importance of the

environment in any child's development. According to Bronfenbrenner (1999), the PPCT has three properties, namely:

[a] the individual must engage in an activity, [b] to be effective, the activity must take place on a fairly regular basis over an extended period and become increasingly complex, and [c] proximal processes are not limited to interpersonal interactions; they can also involve interaction with objects and symbols. (p. 5)

Thus, the 4-year-old learners' holistic development depends significantly on the activities the ECD educators engage them in. These activities should be done regularly over the period they were admitted in the ECD centre until their exit to Grade R. The PPCT model emphasises life transitions and individual changes through time, such as children's transition to adulthood and significant life changes over time (Ashiabi & O'Neal 2015; Bronfenbrenner 1979; Paat 2013). We ascertained this model's relevance as a child's development is affected by their individual, social and immediate external relationships around them. The model assisted in comprehending the impact of social interaction in all systems, such as school, family, home and other related activities in bearing 4-year-old learners' readiness for Grade R.

Literature review

The navigation of appropriate scholarly literature was propelled by their urge to understand how ECD educators perceived 4-year-old learners' readiness for Grade R. Considering this quest, the researchers reviewed the literature on at least four main typical developmental milestones of children.

Intellectual readiness skills of young children

Naz et al. (2014:993) define intellectual wellness as 'discovering hidden talents of artistic, inspiring and thought-provoking activities to enhance one's mental capabilities and flourish one's personality'. A learner must, therefore, be able to understand, reason and interpret new concepts. Mazurek and Neale (2018:10) state that 'the intellectually well person values lifelong learning and seeks to foster critical thinking, develop moral reasoning, expand world views, and engage in education to pursue knowledge'. However, learning begins at a tender age. At 4-5 years old, learners absorb and process all new information. Enquiry skills and concept construction in young learners develop through play (Ursache, Blair & Raver 2012).

Davis et al. (2015) emphasise the importance of parents' time with their children. Generally, there is such a significant change in societies where both parents work and do not find time to interact with their children. In the little time they scarcely find, they often focus on developing intellectual skills, not physical or social skills, although wellness is a holistic integration of language, physical, mental and social well-being (Stoewen 2017). Televisions and computers have also made it easy to keep children busy while parents attend to house chores. Nikken (2019) reckons that parents use these

devices as valuable tools for child-rearing. Although it is not wrong to use these devices moderately, Rocha and Nunes (2020) advise parents also to remember to play outside with their children by kicking the ball around or playing hide and seek to allow for holistic development.

Social readiness skills of young children

Transition to Grade R cannot be smooth partly because children are going from their 'safe' environment to a structured environment with other routines, longer hours and more pressure (Excell & Linington 2015). Transition can be interpreted as a potentially stressful situation. It involves the transition from the family to the ECD centre and from the ECD centre to school, including horizontal transitions, when the child is transferred from one educational institution to another at the same level (Babić 2014). It also involves changes in the individual's identity, relationships between children and between children and adults (educators and parents), the routine structure, learning strategies and expected learning outcomes (Ahtola et al. 2011, 2016).

UNICEF (2012) defines the process of transition in ECD as:

[C]hildren moving into and adjusting to new learning environments, families learning to work within a socio-cultural system [i.e. education] and school making provisions for admitting new children into the system. (p. 8)

This transition is filled with sensitive and social alterations (Kokkalia et al. 2019). As child development does not occur in a vacuum (Lewis 2019), children need to be socially comfortable in their environment. If a child cannot play socially with other children, they do not learn turn-taking and negotiation skills. Literature also reveals that a child who is not socially and emotionally sound will scream, yell, complain and cling to their mother's skirt when it is time to attend school (Excell & Linington 2015; Lewis 2019). As a result, conflict, unhappiness and dishonesty are inevitable when interacting with other learners, and the ECD practitioner acts as a judge, but this teaches the child how to manage and process difficult situations (Ashiabi & O'Neal 2015). The social readiness skill will teach them how to manage stressful situations for the rest of their lives and adapt to the unknown. Although a child's well-being is multifaceted, including emotional well-being, social well-being, family well-being, health well-being and other forms of well-being, boundaries remain unclear because of its interwoven nature (Amerijckx & Humblet 2013).

Language readiness skills of young children

Language readiness skill can be understood as the process of developing the capacity to speak, which starts with the children hearing and understanding the pitch of the mother's voice and culminates with the child using words effectively to transmit thoughts and desires (Barrot 2014). Accordingly, Hagen, Melby-Lervåg and Lervåg (2017:1132) uphold that 'the ability to comprehend and use language effectively for communication is a fundamental part of child development'.

This domain plays a significant role in a child's life when communicating with people in their environment and listening to diverse sounds of a spoken language. Thus, oral language skills as the system through which spoken words are used to express knowledge, ideas and feelings are essential for the child's school readiness (Barrot 2014). However, children may experience learning language skills delays because of developmental delays and neurodevelopmental challenges like autism spectrum disorder (Mazibuko, Shilubane & Manganye 2020). Fundamentally, children's use of language is an integral system of growth; speaking also serves as an indicator of fine motor skill development and a reflection of cognitive development (Bronfenbrenner 1999; Hesketh, Tinkley & Campbell 2012; UNICEF 2019) because children have to think before speaking and rely heavily on demonstrating what they are speaking about.

Physical readiness skills of young children

Physical readiness refers to all development in body movements. Many of these movements are learnt automatically because they are movements made daily. Hardy, White and Gray (2015) refer to such conscious movements as voluntary. The authors state that these include children's rolling, sitting, crawling, jumping, walking and running. Sometimes involuntary movements result from the unconscious movement of muscles in the body's internal organs, such as the stomach, intestines and bladder (Lucas & Schofield 2010). With physical well-being as one of the criteria for school readiness, there has been a conspicuous decline in the physical activity of preschool learners over the past few decades (Ali et al. 2017; Lucas & Schofield 2010; Robinson, Wadsworth & Peoples 2012).

Nevertheless, there are general physical expectations of the state of a 4-year-old learner who is gearing up for Grade R. Hesketh et al. (2012) state that children should be able to engage in age-appropriate physical activities, which will speak to school readiness. Gu, Chang and Solomon (2016) differentiate between physical activity and physical fitness, stating that the former promotes growth and development while the latter indicates health-related outcomes. Hence, physical well-being is necessary for learners in Grade R where formal schooling begins. In order to improve their physical well-being, learners need activities that would enhance their motor (fine and gross) skills proficiency (Bamitale & Boluwaji 2013).

Research methods and design

The nature of this study required the use of a qualitative research methodological approach to elicit credible data from the purposively sampled participants (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2018). However, qualitative research is not easy to define as it is best used for describing, interpreting, contextualising and gaining in-depth insight into specific concepts or phenomena (McCombes 2019). The researchers used the interpretive paradigm because this research study looked at human behaviour and could not be generalised.

The researchers generated data qualitatively from three purposively and conveniently sampled ECD educators from an ECD centre located in a marginalised rural context of the Mandlankala area, Empangeni, north of Zululand. A selected ECD centre, which was a context of interest, was registered with the Department of Social Development; however, it was privately owned. Eighty-six learners were under the care of two ECD educators and a principal. Each playroom had mixed ages ranging from birth to 4 years. Because of the ECD centre's nature, they were all selected as participants. The researchers used the participants' codes to protect their identity and the research site. Two qualitative data generation methods were used to generate credible and trustworthy data: semi-structured interviews and 4-year-old learners' physical, language, cognitive, emotional and social behaviour observations.

The authors followed a six-step data analysis as advised by Smith and Firth (2011), Chenail (2012) and Cohen et al. (2018). These steps were as follows: (1) **Familiarisation**: The researchers read through the data to become familiar with it and gain an overall understanding of the content; (2) **Coding**: The researchers identified and labelled different parts of the data with codes that represent ideas; (3) **Generating Themes**: The researchers grouped codes to form primary themes; (4) **Reviewing Themes**: The researchers reviewed the themes to ensure they accurately reflected the data and made sense; (5) **Defining and Naming Themes**: The researchers defined and named the themes based on their content and meaning; and (6) **Writing Up**: The researchers wrote up the analysis, including a description of the themes and how they related to the research questions.

Creswell and Creswell (2017) maintain that thematic analysis involves an interpretative process in which data are systematically arranged according to patterns to illuminate the phenomenon.

The following elements for the maintenance of research rigour were considered:

- **Credibility**: Credibility refers to how accurately the researcher interprets the responses from the participants (Creswell 2013). The researchers used two data generation methods: semi-structured interviews and learners' physical, language, cognitive, emotional and social behaviour observations. These were used to understand how 4-year-old learners developed skills that were paramount in their readiness for Grade R. Because of the semi-structured interviews' nature and their allowance for probing, the researchers posed unbiased and open-ended questions.
- **Transferability**: Transferability means how the researchers demonstrated the applicability of one's research findings to other contexts (Abdalla et al. 2018). The researchers maintained transferability by providing a thorough and detailed account of the research methods.
- **Confirmability**: According to Creswell and Creswell (2017), this is associated with emphasising whether another might validate the study's conclusions. The

researchers ensured that they recorded and transcribed precisely the ECD educators' responses and kept fieldnotes for the observations, which were ultimately analysed thematically.

- **Dependability**: Petty, Thomson and Stew et al. (2012) assert that dependability in a research study refers to the degree of consistency, reliability and stability of findings and interpretations throughout the research process. The researchers ensured that they precisely stated each phase of the study process so that future researchers may reproduce it in other situations.

Before conducting a research study, a researcher must obtain ethics approval (Creswell & Creswell 2017); although this can be bureaucratic, time-consuming and frustrating, the process can never be disregarded. Thus, it is crucial to go through official gatekeepers when approaching participants. This is because it is often only through these gatekeepers that researchers gain access to the potential participants (Chenail 2012; Cohen et al. 2018).

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of KwaZulu-Natal Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (No. HSS/1898/018D).

Results and interpretation

The results and interpretation of data that was generated through the researchers' engagement with the purposively and conveniently sampled ECD educators are presented below in themes.

Theme 1: Physical independence as a precursor for Grade R readiness

The research findings from this study established that the glaring challenge was attaining physical skills, particularly toileting, washing hands and putting shoes on and off:

'We teach learners motor skills so they can take care of themselves easily. Doing movement activities assists them with physical independence. In the process, they also learn what they can or can't do, like climbing the jungle gym easily'. (Participant 1, Female)

'Learners need a lot of unstructured playground time to benefit their developing bodies and brain. All of these activities benefit a young learner's physical development. When learners are playing, they are healthily using their bodies'. (Participant 1, Female)

'We engage learners in movement activities which allow them to manage themselves independently. They learn how to dress themselves and how to brush their teeth. This helps them. If they have an accident when they are learning to go to the toilet, they can change themselves into clean clothes. We need to allow them'. (Participant 2, Female)

'Learners participate in fine and gross motor skills. We also encourage them to communicate their needs to us. If they need to wash their hands, they should know how to say so. They also have to learn to communicate with fellow learners.

Insufficient communication causes much frustration for learners.’ (Participant 3, Female)

Although ECD educators engaged learners in motor skills development activities, the above narratives confirmed the researchers’ observations that there were developmental delays in some daily physical development skills. The researchers’ observations also confirmed Excell and Linington’s (2015) assertions that children’s developmental domains are integrated and none can succeed without the influence of the other. These included toilet training, washing hands and putting shoes on and off, employing their reasoning capabilities and language to express themselves, using fine and gross motor skills to perform other expected duties and getting ready for self-independence. According to Petit Early Learning Journey (2014), self-care skills or self-help skills are abilities that children gradually attain to give them more independence. It is basically about learning life skills to look after themselves without depending on others.

Theme 2: Knowledge and understanding of instructions

According to Hagen et al. (2017), language development starts with sounds and gestures, then words and sentences; hence, knowledge and understanding of instructions depend essentially on the child’s language understanding:

‘Some learners fail to follow instructions accurately and often misinterpret information. When you tell them to bend their knees, they appear distracted and non-compliant.’ (Participant 1, Female)

‘They look at you blankly when you give them an instruction because they are not used to that at home.’ (Participant 2, Female)

‘They sometimes refuse to follow instructions and engage in another activity they choose.’ (Participant 3, Female)

Through the researchers’ observations, some learners avoided carrying out instructions by talking about something else to distract the person giving the instruction. Others looked to peers to work out what they needed to do during group movement activities. This act of imitation is supported by Meltzoff and Williamson (2017:3) who state that ‘there is no question that children are avid imitators...’ In doing so, learners do not miss out on working on gross and fine motor skills such as strength, balance, hand-eye coordination, agility, speed skills and development of social skills like turn-taking, cooperation and vocabulary development.

According to Sowell (2017), educators should avoid giving wordy instructions and be precise. The researchers observed that educators were giving verbose instructions to learners. This resulted in unclear instructions, which caused ambiguity.

Furthermore, the lack of sufficient vocabulary added more to their frustration. Neuman and Wright (2014:7) suggest that ‘reading books aloud to children is a powerful and motivating source for vocabulary development’. This commences in a

home environment where parental involvement is expected to be evident in reading bedtime stories and language-elevating conversations. In affirmation, Gnjatovic (2015:86) states that ‘the quality of the language development depends on many factors like the home environment, language-rich experiences, child’s well-being, physical health and intellectual development’.

Theme 3: Dealing with emotions

While children are doing physical activities, they need to be able to manage how they react to their emotions and control their behaviour and body movements when faced with a situation that they may find challenging (Excell & Linington 2015; Ashiabi & O’Neal 2015). The interwovenness of well-being shows that physical, mental and emotional well-being are intrinsically linked:

‘Our children like to be reassured that they are doing a great job and when not praised, they become emotionally stressed.’ (Participant 1, Female)

‘They also have to learn to communicate with fellow learners when playing. Insufficient communication causes much frustration for learners.’ (Participant 3, Female)

‘We establish routines so that they always remember what they should do. Unfortunately, only a few learners remember to do this. We have to remind them time and again. This is because, at home, their parents do not ensure that they follow instructions accordingly and avoid distractions.’ (Participant 2, Female)

The ability to communicate with others in the classroom, including ECD educators and peers, and outside of school is associated with social and emotional development (Blair & Raver 2015). These skills influence how 4-year-old learners interact with others, deal with their emotions and react to events around them.

In this study, self-regulatory behaviours were most commonly observed in children during collaborative, learner-initiated physical activities. During these activities, the researchers observed that some 4-year-old learners lacked patience and the ability to share toys with others.

Theme 4: Development of cognitive independence

Affirmations are based on the idea that ‘people are motivated to maintain self-integrity’ (Cohen & Sherman 2014:336). In the same breath, young children must be motivated and praised for their good deeds.

Positive words and phrases of affirmation like ‘well done’, ‘you are capable’ and ‘I know you can handle it’ encouraged the efforts of learners who followed instructions correctly. While doing this, the researchers observed that ECD educators paired a learner’s name with a positive phrase, ‘I know you can do it Thakasa’. Through our observation, such words created a positive belief system and positive self-

perceptions for learners, which ultimately created learners' cognitive independence.

According to van Rensburg (2015:5), 'school readiness means learning some other things'. Thus, cognitive independence means children learn to wait for their turn and not display outbursts and irritability to express their emotions. The researchers observed that some 4-year-old learners used hitting, biting and pushing to solve conflicts. Although they understandably do not understand the difference between appropriate and inappropriate interactions, Cohen and Sherman (2014) advise that cognitive independence should be taught while children are still at a tender age. Such cognitive independence plays a significant role in a child's readiness for a 'big school'.

Discussion

This research study aimed to explore ECD educators' understandings of typical 4-year-old learners' aspects of development and how this supports their readiness for Grade R. Thus, analysing and understanding how emotional, psychological, language, social and physical development enable or constrain 4-year-old learners' readiness for Grade R were explored in detail. This study established that 4-year-old learners exhibited insufficient development skills because of a lack of ability to follow instructions. The literature revealed that learners often fail to follow instructions and execute targeted tasks because their educators give them verbose instructions. It is also worth noting that 4-year-old learners' language development lacked some vocabulary and language use. Meltzoff and Williamson (2017) advise that instructions should be short and precise. For instance, ECD educators should teach learners how to use acceptable language in a school environment. Some learners were witnessed using colloquial language when asking to go to the toilet: 'Ngifuna ukubhoshha', instead of a polite language 'Ngcicela ukuzikhulula'. The use of colloquial language in 4-year-old learners results from proximal processes. Basically, the learners' interactions result from their environment, in this case, home (Merçon-Vargas et al. 2020). The interaction between the learners' parents and the ECD educators can foster learners' appropriate use of language over time and contribute to their holistic development. Such holistic development contributes tremendously to developing skills, which are eminent in Grade R. Sadly, a lack of parental involvement caused ECD educators to struggle to inculcate good and acceptable behaviour in 4-year-old learners.

Data revealed that ECD educators' use of affirmations and motivation contributed enormously to the learners' ability to deal with stress and emotions. As language and literacy are development skills in typical domains, learners' ability to use language to express their feelings would significantly contribute to their cognitive independence (Cohen & Sherman 2014). For instance, when learners are expected to remember the consecutive steps of undressing, sitting, going, wiping, dressing, flushing, dressing up and washing hands,

and ultimately these are done accordingly, the affirmation would contribute to a recurring good process and behaviour.

Another finding suggested a lack of collaboration between parents and ECD educators. According to Excell and Linington (2014), parental involvement in the early years of schooling and beyond is a substantial deterministic factor in a child's learning outcomes. In this research study, it was evident that parents and other adults at home who form the microsystem did not give the learner sufficient independence skills. They did not give the child enough stimulation, support and experiences to facilitate their readiness for Grade R. The insufficiencies of one microsystem, the home, got transferred to another microsystem, the ECD centre.

Conclusion

This study embraces the notion that holistic development in 4-year-old learners is highly variable because they develop at their own pace. Not all 4-year-old learners are fully ready for Grade R's language, social, cognitive and physical activities when transitioning to a 'big school'. This was proven to be caused by the fact that some still cannot independently perform typical skills that involve physical independence, following instructions or using language to express their feelings and emotions. It is also worth noting that typical skills development in 4-year-old learners is highly variable because children develop at their own pace. As a result, labelling children as not being school-ready at such an early age may cause them to be isolated from a more appropriate learning environment. However, developmental milestones should give a general idea of changes to expect as a child grows. The unsatisfactory level of readiness was also proven to be partially exacerbated by a lack of parental involvement. A lack of parental involvement results from rife poverty in Mandlankala rural area where most homes are low income. Because of the unemployment rate, many parents are under pressure to provide a day's meal in their households, and as a result, becoming involved or taking part in their children's day-to-day activities is not a priority in these poverty-stricken homes. Therefore, Bronfenbrenner's PPCT model's proposition that a good relationship between learners' parents and ECD educators would positively affect the learners' development and readiness for Grade R is unquestionable.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

N.P.P., a PhD candidate, generated and transcribed the data. J.M. assisted with the conceptual writing of the article, collating findings for the purpose of writing and submitting it to the DHET-accredited peer-reviewed journal.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are not openly available due to confidentiality and are available from the corresponding author, N.P.P., upon reasonable request.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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