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Teachers' Perceptions of School Readiness Among Grade 1 Learners in Lesotho Schools: The Case of Roma Valley

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Abstract. The study investigated teachers' perceptions of school readiness among children who start Grade 1 in government primary schools in the Roma Valley in Lesotho. Compared to the privately owned schools, the three government schools from which teachers were recruited for this investigation had limited infrastructure, facilities, and resources. In addition, these schools practised static teaching and each had only one teacher who had experience of working with children who start formal schooling for the first time. In a way, the teachers who participated in this study were self-selective. A qualitative approach that used semi-structured interviews was used to explore the perceptions of these teachers. Data collected were analysed using a thematic approach. According to the teachers participating in this study, most children in Lesotho start formal schooling unprepared and without any foundational education background. They associated children's lack of readiness among these children with a lack of foundational education. As a result, these children struggle to adapt to the school environment. These teachers further pointed out that factors such as age, disability, gender, and socio-economic background can influence the speed at which the children adapt to school life and culture. This study recommends that the government should find strategies that support the implementation and monitoring of a policy on children and foundational education. Further, there should be programmes that educate parents about foundation education and that support teachers to work with children who do not have a background of foundational education when they begin formal schooling.

Keywords: school readiness, foundational skills, learner-preparedness, teachers' perceptions, formal schooling

1. Introduction

The global view is that education is a universal human right and a powerful weapon for eradicating poverty and improving the health, status and socio-economic conditions of individuals, families, communities, and societies. As such, there has been a lot of emphasis on improving the young generation's access to

free quality education that is not disadvantaged by gender, race, or socio-economic status (Sachs, 2012). Some of this emphasis focuses on the preparation of children for formal schooling in order to increase their chances of academic success. The general argument is that school readiness bridges a gap between the home and school environment and enables children's smooth transition from home to school. For example, Heerden et al. (2017) has observed that on the very first day of formal schooling, children who have been prepared and are ready for schooling integrate and work well with school authorities, teachers, and other learners. School readiness has also been associated with learners' academic success in the advanced levels of education and post-school career life. Because of these observations, there has been a push to prepare children for formal schooling through foundational education. Foundational education has been viewed as a strategy that successfully equips children with the necessary skills to start formal schooling. Janse van Rensburg (2015) attests that foundational education develops a child holistically (cognitively, socially, emotionally, physically, and morally) and has far-reaching positive effects on a child's future academic and adult life and living conditions. Foundational skills enable children who start formal schooling to cope with the school culture and demands that are new to them (Heerden et al., 2017).

2. Efforts to make foundational education accessible to all children

Ensuring that "no child is left behind" relates to access to quality foundational education, and governments have been investing in foundational education programmes in many ways. Some focus on adult and professional programmes that aim to develop parents' and teachers' knowledge and skills necessary for preparing children for formal schooling. Some of these programmes target teachers and parents who work with children from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds. For example, the European Getting Ready for School (GRS) is a government-funded programme with the intention to develop early literacy, maths, and self-regulatory skills of preschool children from socio-economically disadvantaged families (Marti et al., 2018). This programme has school and home components. The school component is implemented by teachers in a school-like setting and the home component is supported by parents in a home setting. As a result, the programme trains both teachers and parents to develop the knowledge and skills they need to assist children while at school and at home. The parents and teachers receive training through workshops and printed materials that have instructions on how to work with children (Marti et al., 2018). In the United States of America, governments fund programmes that enhance easy access to foundational education for vulnerable children and those coming from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. An example is the Head Start Program (HSP), which targets children living in America and whose families are migrants and are socio-economically disadvantaged, and thus are likely to have limited opportunities to access quality foundational education for preschoolers (Gottfried & Kim, 2015). On the other hand, the Malaysian education system has taken a route that forces parents to enrol their children in foundational

education programmes. The system subjects every child to a readiness assessment before they are admitted into basic education (Majzub & Rashid, 2012).

The Lesotho Government, which is also committed to ensuring that by 2030, all children living in Lesotho have access to quality foundational education, integrated foundational education into the formal education system structure in 2009. The government also introduced a policy that directs the integration of foundational education programmes into mainstream education (Morojele, 2017). This policy, similar to the South African, directs primary schools to attach a one-year reception programme for children who are about to start formal schooling. The intention of this policy is to create a facility that prepares and provides 5-year-olds with a one-year pre-school experience before they join Grade 1.

Before these reforms were introduced, there was very little emphasis on children's readiness for formal schooling in Lesotho. Many children started formal schooling without any foundational education or preparation. A child's school readiness was measured only in terms of age, and parents were discouraged from sending their children to school before they were six years old. The main argument for this practice was that children below the age of six years were too immature to start school. Age was the only scale that was used by schools, parents, and governments to measure school readiness among children. This means that, before foundation education reforms were introduced in the Lesotho education system, many children began formal schooling without any preparation. Therefore, introducing reception classes in the education system was a way of remedying this situation and ensuring that every child had basic exposure to foundational education before starting with formal schooling. However, and despite these efforts, the government reports indicate that very few primary schools in Lesotho have established reception classes. For example, according to 2004 and 2015 reports (these were the latest reports available when this study was carried out), out of a total of 1 478, only 243 primary schools have reception classes attached to them. The reports further show that many parents continue to keep their children at home until they are six years old and that children's enrolment in the foundational education programmes in Lesotho declines every year. As such, many children still start formal schooling without any foundational education (Ministry of Education and Training [MOET], 2004 & 2015).

3. The Concept of School Readiness

School readiness could be viewed as a multi-dimensional construct that incorporates the readiness of a child, a community, and the a school that a child is about to join. Because of its multidimensional nature, this concept is often defined differently by different scholars. Concerning a family, a community, and a school, readiness is about the preparedness of these institutions to support a school beginner (McGettigan & Gray, 2012). With a family or a community dimension, the focus is on a child's family and/or community readiness to support a child who is about to start formal schooling. Regarding a school dimension, the focus is on the school's preparedness in terms of the facilities and resources that support a child who is about to begin formal schooling (Lynch & Smith, 2016). Concerning a child, school readiness refers to a child's possession of

the skills necessary for school life (Marti et al., 2018; McGettigan & Gray, 2012; UNICEF, 2012). This paper focuses on the dimension of a child.

3.1. Child's readiness for formal schooling

A child's readiness for formal schooling refers to how well a child is or has been prepared to transition into formal schooling. This kind of readiness is about the skills a child has who starts schooling. These skills enable a child to participate and integrate easily into school activities (UNICEF, 2012). According to UNICEF (2012), child who is ready for schooling is able to participate in school activities that are cognitive, affective, linguistic, social, or physical (psychomotor) with limited difficulty. The UNICEF observation is supported by Hasan, Hyson and Chang (2013), who contend that children who are ready to begin formal schooling should be able to carry out school tasks that require them to get along and cooperate with others; demonstrate self-confidence; express themselves using language (the ability to use words or say names and things); respond to the messages that are communicated through language (ability to understand what is said by others), and follow the rules. As explained by Janus and Gaskin (2013), a child who has been prepared for formal schooling should possess the capabilities needed to meet the cognitive, physical, and social demands imposed by school life.

From Janus and Gaskin's (2013) viewpoint, child readiness could be viewed from the aspects of physical readiness, cognitive readiness, and socio-emotional readiness. Physical readiness is a child's ability to hold or handle tools and equipment used in a school such as pens, pencils, and crayons. Physical readiness means a child has developed fine motor skills, physical maturity, and gross motor skills (Janus & Gaskin, 2013). On the other hand, socio-emotional readiness is about a child's developed soft skills. It refers to a child's ability to form close relationships with others, and to be able to regulate self and express his or her emotions in accepted social and cultural ways. Cognitive readiness refers to a child's literacy, numeracy, and conceptual skills that are needed to carry out school-cognitive tasks. These skills require of children to use their working memory and attention span to participate effectively in school life (Hsin & Xie, 2017). These skills, also known as hard skills, are essential for a child's school readiness and are often measured by test scores.

4. Research on school readiness

Many scholars have been interested in children's school readiness and have investigated children's school readiness from various angles. Some focused on the relationship between school readiness and a child's academic performance; others on child readiness and adaptation to the school environment factors, and a few on teachers' interpretation of school readiness. Pan et al. (2019) investigated the relationship between child readiness and a child's academic performance. They established that there is a strong relationship between school readiness and learner academic performance. Their study suggests that children who start formal schooling prepared are likely to perform academically better than those who have not been prepared. The studies that have investigated child readiness and adaptation to the school environment focus on the factors influencing factors. They discovered that factors that influence a child's readiness and adaptation to

the school environment could be related to a learner, a community, a family, and a school.

Learner-related factors: Aslan and Cikar (2019) found that age and gender influence how a child copes with the demands of formal schooling. Their study established that under-aged children are usually not able to cope with these demands. On the other hand, Brock and Curby (2016), Ensar and Keskin (2014), McCartin (2016), and Son, Lee, and Sung (2013) discovered that gender also influences how children adapt to the school culture. For example, Son et al. (2013) observed that, compared to girls, boys delay to develop cognitive skills and socio-emotional skills, and display lower academic achievement at school. On the other hand, girls significantly outperform boys in early reading, social and academic skills. Hatcher, Nuner, and Paulsel (2012) found that learners' health, attention, confidence, and learning interest could also influence learner readiness and adaptation to the school culture and environment.

Community/Family-related factors: Bailey (2014) and Majzub and Rashid (2012) established that the community and family socio-economic statuses influence how children participate in the foundational programmes and ultimately their readiness. They observed that children coming from disadvantaged families and communities such as rural and low socio-economic backgrounds, often do not participate in foundational education programmes. As thus, compared to those who participated in these programmes, these children do not adapt easily to the culture and demands of a school.

School-related factors: these factors are related to a school as an institution and its community. Janse van Rensburg (2015), Pan et al. (2019) investigated how the preparedness of a school influences a child's adaptability to its environment. They discovered a relationship between school preparedness to accommodate a child and a child's adaptability. They observed that a child easily adapts to a school environment that has facilities and resources that support a child to acclimatise quickly to the school environment. Similarly, where the facilities and resources are limited or are not appropriate for a school beginner, a learner struggles to adapt.

Teachers' perceptions: Literature consistently indicates that teachers' professional behaviour, commitment to work, selection of teaching strategies and materials, and the efforts they put into making learning successful are mostly influenced by their perceptions. Teachers' perceptions are the beliefs and views teachers have about their world of work; what they are confronted with, whether it is about curriculum reform or a classroom situation. Teachers' aspects such as knowledge and skills, and experiences, which often contribute to their attitudes, shape teachers' perceptions. For example, where teachers believe that their efforts are likely to benefit their learners, teachers are likely to put an extra effort into what they do. On the one hand, they are likely to put very little effort into what they do not believe in. Thus, teachers' perceptions of child's readiness have an influence on how they work with children who begin formal schooling for the first time (Kartal & Guner, 2018; Kakia, Popov & Arani 2015; Ohle & Harvey, 2017; Serry et al., 2014). For example, Kartal and Guner (2018), Serry et al. (2014), Kakia et al.

(2015), and Ohle and Harvey (2017) investigated how teachers' perceptions of child school readiness influence their professional approach to children whom they do not consider ready for schooling. Firstly, Serry et al. (2014) and Kakia et al. (2015) observe that in their interpretations, teachers often consider a wide range of aspects of readiness of a child. These include the child's cognitive, social, self-care, emotional and language maturity, health, attention span, confidence, and learning interest. These studies further discovered that how teachers perceive child readiness influences the extent to which they are prepared to support a learner.

In Lesotho, the importance of learner readiness to start formal schooling is beginning to be considered. The government policies encourage schools to include programmes that provide access to foundational education for children who are to start formal schooling. However, and as indicated earlier in this paper, many schools have not responded well to this government effort. The records further show that even at the schools that have responded to the government's efforts and are providing these programmes, the children's enrolment declines every year. The assumption in this study was that the situation might even be worse in rural areas where many parents themselves are not educated well enough to appreciate learner preparedness, and schools are not properly resourced with qualified teachers and learning materials. The main quest of this study was to establish how teachers at these schools deal with children who have not been prepared for formal schooling.

5. Research Purpose and Questions

The main purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of Grade 1 teachers in the Roma Valley about working with children who are not prepared for formal schooling. During data collection, the following questions were asked: (1) How do Grade 1 teachers in Lesotho schools interpret school readiness?; (2) What are teachers' experiences of working with children who have not been prepared for schooling?; and (3) What are teachers' views on the factors that influence children in Lesotho to start formal schooling unprepared?

6. Methodology

This is a qualitative study that used a case study design. The case in this study was three government schools situated in Roma Valley. Roma Valley is a small, rural community that has three government schools and a few privately owned primary schools. The choice of government schools was based on their shared characteristics in terms of infrastructure, facilities, resources, and curriculum practices. For example, most government primary schools practise grade-static teaching, where a teacher is positioned to teach a specific grade only. This type of teaching gives teachers ample experience of many years of teaching at this level.

Because this was a case study, the teachers who participated in this study were self-selective. For example, there were only three government primary schools in the Roma Valley, with one Grade 1 teacher at each school. This means that only three teachers in the Roma Valley were suited to participate in this study. All three these teachers had more than 20 years' teaching experience.

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews. Each participant was subjected to an hour's interview where they were guided with questions to talk about their perceptions about working with children who start formal schooling unprepared.

Data collected were analysed using a thematic approach that was based on a six-phase model or a six step-by-step framework of Braun and Clarke (2013). In the process of this analysis, the information was coded, cleaned, analysed, and interpreted. The coding system included naming the participants as Participant 1, Participant 2, and Participant 3. The naming of these participants was based on the order in which the participants were interviewed. The information collected from these participants was coded, analysed, classified and interpreted into three major themes: teachers' interpretation of school readiness, teachers' experiences of working with children who have not been prepared for schooling, and teachers' views on the factors that influence children in Lesotho to start formal schooling in Lesotho. The results from this process are presented hereafter.

7. Presentation of Results

The results of this study are presented as teachers' interpretation of school readiness, teachers' experiences of working with learners who have not been prepared for schooling, and teachers' views of the factors that influence children in Lesotho to start formal schooling unprepared.

7.1 Teachers' interpretation of school readiness

In this study, teachers interpreted school readiness in terms of a child's possession of foundation skills that include the ability to communicate, developed psychomotor abilities, cognitive maturity, and ability to socialise.

Ability to communicate: The teachers considered the developed communication skills of a child as one of the indicators that a child is ready for schooling. According to these teachers, the child's communication skills should enable him to listen effectively to understand and follow the teachers' instructions, to communicate his or her needs and concerns, and to answer simple questions with complete sentences. One participant mentioned a child being able to listen attentively and able to follow the teachers' instructions, while all three of them believed that a child who starts schooling should be able to express his/her needs and concerns, and answer simple questions about themselves and their parents. Participant 2 explained this by saying,

I understand learner readiness as a child's ability to communicate effectively, especially at the beginning of the year. The children should be able to respond in complete sentences to the questions that inquire about them and their family members. For example, when asked about their names with a question, 'what is your name?' A child should be able to say, 'My name is Peter' (where the name of a child is Peter). They should not just say, 'Peter'. I regard such learners as ready for Grade 1.

In support of this, Participant 1 pointed out the importance of assessing a child's ability to communicate in the language a child knows and is comfortable using. This is how she put it,

Where there is more than one language used, a child's ability to communicate should be assessed in a language used at home. Their communication skill should be assessed on how they identify and greet different categories of people in their environment and address them accordingly as fathers, mothers, sisters, and brothers in their language.

On the other hand, Participant 2 and Participant 3 emphasised the importance of the child's ability to follow instructions at the start of Grade 1. They pointed out that following instructions is part of the everyday life of a child. For example, Participant 2 said, "*learners are required to follow instructions in a home or a school setting, they are often given some duties to perform and these duties are communicated through instructions*". Participant 3 also made the same observation in her explanation,

Examples of the instructions that a child may be given by a schoolteacher or at home could be, 'Peter, bring me a pencil', 'bring me stone', or 'give me ten buttons'. If a child is able to listen effectively, follow these instructions and respond appropriately; and it is not his or her first time seeing a teacher in a school setting, she or he is ready.

Other communication skills that were mentioned to be important for a child who starts schooling included being able to seek permission, not speaking out of turn, and being able to interact with other children. All the participants in this study believed that the importance of developed communication skills of the children who start schooling is crucial and surpasses other foundation skills. They pointed out that these skills make a child's transition from home to school smooth and easy. In support of this view, one participant pointed out that, contrary to other skills that they often consider in the second quarter of the year, such as reading and writing, a child's ability to communicate is tested on the very first day of formal schooling. They all pointed out that children whose communication skills (speaking and listening) are not well developed when they begin school often struggle to participate fully in the learning activities. For example, Participant 1 observed in her explanation that "*children who lack communication skills are often shy to speak and not able or reluctant to seek permission. They spend their school time miserable and crying all the time*".

Developed Psychomotor abilities: Teachers in this study considered children's development of psychomotor skills assimilarly important for a child's readiness for formal schooling. They argue that children joining Grade 1 should be able to hold pencils, crayons, and other educational materials like a pair of scissors appropriately. The children should demonstrate the ability to turn books and hold pencils correctly. Where they are not able to do this, they should be able to follow and imitate the teacher's demonstration.

Cognitive Maturity: Cognitive maturity was also viewed by all the participants as one crucial aspect of readiness. They argued that, regardless of foundation educational background, children should demonstrate some level of independence in whatever they do when they start schooling. For example, they should be able to start and finish assigned tasks independently. According to these participants, cognitive maturity is somehow linked to developed

communication skills. They pointed out that when children's communication skills are well developed and have cognitive maturity, they listen attentively, and with limited guidance, they follow instructions. They again explained that attentive listening is a sign of a good attention span, which in turn is a representation of cognitive maturity. Further, they believed that a child's cognitive maturity could be demonstrated by a child's recognition and naming of familiar objects and people in his or her environment. Participant 3 explained this by saying, "*As real objects, or images, a child should be able to identify and name familiar objects that are found in their environments such as birds, people, plants, and animals.*"

The use of language, which was also linked to developed communication, was mentioned as another aspect of cognitive maturity a child should exhibit. The participants claimed that a cognitively mature child uses proper language to name objects, report incidents, and express concerns while those who use vulgar language may be demonstrating cognitive immaturity. Being able to work independently and able to finish their work was also mentioned as a sign of cognitive maturity of a learner by these teachers.

The participants linked the development of literacy and numeracy skills to cognitive. Their view is that children's literacy and numeracy skills should be developed before they start schooling. They view preschool centres and homes as the best places to assist children to develop these skills. These teachers pointed out that they expect children to have a developed understanding of the concepts of reading, counting, writing, and drawing. Their explanation was that a child should at least be able to make sense of and respond to the teacher's instructions that require of them to draw, count, read or write. This was emphasised by Participant 2 who said,

Children should be able to count up to five objects when they join the first grade. When they are asked how many birds are in the picture, a child should be able to count using fingers: 'one, two, three, four, and five.

Ability to socialise: In this study socialisation was another aspect of readiness that was viewed as important. For example, Participant 3 explained that children should be able to interact and play with their peers and teachers. While doing so, they should be able to observe a school and a home as controlled environments in which they are expected to behave according to the rules. They should not bully others or take others' belongings. They should be able to differentiate between right and wrong and expect to be disciplined when they have misbehaved. From the viewpoint of these teachers, a child who is unprepared for schooling does not follow any school rules and does not like to be disciplined.

7.2 Teachers' experiences of working with children who have not been prepared for schooling

Teachers in this study indicated that they mostly work with children who had not been prepared and are not ready for formal schooling. For example, Participant 3 indicated that all 17 learners who were in her class joined Grade 1 unprepared. This participant explained that their foundation skills were not well developed to the level where they could be considered ready for schooling. This teacher pointed out that while 11 of them were able to catch up by the end of the first quarter of

the school year, the other six were not able to. The skills of these six learners had not improved in the third quarter of the school year and the teachers suspected that they were likely to remain the same until the end of the school year (data collection for this study was done at the beginning of the fourth quarter).

Other participants (Participant 1 and Participant 2) supported this claim by indicating that very few children possess foundation skills when they join Grade 1 and often those would have foundation educational backgrounds. They purported that learners with foundational educational backgrounds are familiar with school culture and demands and know what is expected of them when they are at school, and behave accordingly.

From the explanation of the teachers in this study, children who join Grade 1 without any foundational education are of two types. The first type can regurgitate numbers, alphabets, and school language without any understanding. When this cohort is asked to count, they recite numbers up to 5, yet they are unable to demonstrate their understanding of counting either by using fingers or objects. They cannot recognise numbers and what they represent (Participant 1). As observed by Participant 1, *“they are not able to identify a number corresponding to real objects or those in a picture”*. The other group of learners who come to school unprepared do not know anything about counting and reading. They are unable to respond to any instruction that requires of them to count and read (Participant 1).

All the participants were in agreement that children who have not been prepared for schooling, *“are not able to listen attentively when they first come to school. Most of them misbehave, speak out of turn, leave a class without permission, and cannot read or count”* (Participant 2). Other signs exhibited by the children who have not been prepared for schooling mentioned by the participants include crying and refusing to talk when given instructions; not being able to take care of personal belongings such as books and stationery; not understanding the concept of writing; writing from the right to the left, not recognizing letters and numbers, and not observing the workbook margins and lines; and not being able to sort objects according to the size, colour, and shape.

7.3 Teachers' views on the factors that influence children in Lesotho to start formal schooling unprepared

Teachers in this study believed that factors that appear to influence children in Lesotho to start formal schooling unprepared are age, gender, disabilities (diagnosed and undiagnosed), non-participation in the foundation education programmes, and families' non-involvement.

Age: Teachers indicated that some children are brought to school while they are still underage and are not able to cope with the demands of school. From their viewpoint, poverty forces parents or guardians to send children to school. As they explained, foundational education is not free like primary education in Lesotho. Parents are expected to pay school fees and buy books, stationery, and uniforms. However, because some families cannot afford these costs, they keep their children at home until they are school-age appropriate, or they send them to start formal schooling before they reach an appropriate age. Supporting this claim, Participant 1 said,

There's this child in my class who is underage and whose mother has passed away. The relatives sought special permission from the principal to be admitted into Grade 1 because they could not afford to pay for the preschool education.

The participants expressed their concerns about children who are sent to school before they are school-age appropriate. They indicated that these children are not able to cope with classwork and are often kept in Grade 1 until they reach the right age.

Gender: Gender was also mentioned as one of the factors that influence children's lack of readiness for schooling. The participants believed that comparatively, boys and girls display differences in readiness when they join Grade 1. They pointed out that at the point of school entry, girls appear to be cognitively more mature than boys are. They further explained that even where both lack foundational skills, girls' skills develop quicker than those of boys. These teachers believed, as explained by Participant 2:

Before schooling, girls are with their mothers at home almost all the time, they are constantly supervised and have a better chance of learning some skills from their mothers. Contrarily, boys receive very little supervision, they are always away from home, playing with clay in the dongas while looking after the animals.

As further observed by Participant 2, the cultural practice that exposes boys to very little supervision before schooling results in boys struggling to adapt to the school environment. The boys are mostly the ones who display silly behaviour such as playing, making a noise, pinching one another, and laughing during class time. Furthermore, they are not able to take good care of themselves and their belongings.

Disability: Disability was also identified to be influential in this study. The participants claimed that some of the children who join Grade 1 display some mild or serious cognitive problems. They observed that such children are not able to follow instructions and do not observe the school rules. They explained that working with children of this nature is very challenging as there is hardly any progress in the development of their foundational skills. This is how Participant 2 explained,

There is this child ma'am, who would seek permission to go out to the toilet but will never come back, he would be seen playing with the pre-schoolers around the schoolyard. If he is asked about going back to class to do his work, he would simply reply by saying, yeeses ... Madam ... and he will just continue playing.

As pointed out by this participant, such children do not understand the concept of formal schooling. To these children, school is a place to go to play and get food.

None-participation in foundation education programmes: All the participants in this study indicated that most of the children who join Grade 1 at their schools had not participated in the foundational education programmes in preparation for

schooling. In that regard, they lack many foundational skills, which include counting, writing, reading, copying, and drawing.

Family's non-participation: The participants in this study also claimed that many families do not want to support the education of their children. According to these teachers, most parents at their schools believe that it is the teachers' responsibility to educate children. They leave the whole responsibility of teaching their children to the teachers. They, the parents, appear not to care about how their children spend their time at school and they do not like to assist their children with homework. They always complain about teachers shifting their responsibilities.

7.4 Teachers' experiences of working with learners who lack foundational skills

The results of teachers' experiences of working with learners who lack foundational skills include how teachers support these learners and the challenges they encounter.

7.4.1 How teachers support learners who lack foundational skills

When asked about how they support learners who have not been prepared for schooling, the viewpoint of the participants was that, even though they had been teaching Grade 1 classes for many years, they did not believe that they were trained adequately to deal with children who have not been prepared for schooling. As they claimed, they use various strategies until they find those that work. They further explained that sometimes they do team teach with other teachers as a way of sharing the responsibility. To make team teaching easy, they group learners according to their abilities so that one teacher works with a group of learners that have foundational skills while the other focuses on a group that lack foundational skills. The teachers explained that while these groups would be taught the same content, they try remedial teaching with the group that lacks foundational skills. For example, they incorporate the foundational content, where necessary, to ensure that they have the right foundation for the content taught. As these teachers further explained, sometimes they form small groups of learners who lack foundational skills to ensure that each learner receives individualised attention. Where learner disability is suspected, the teachers claimed that they focus more on teaching the learners life skills rather than wasting time with the recommended curriculum. Participant 3 explained this by saying,

With some learners it is not only about lacking foundational skills, they also exhibit signs of disability such as not being able to talk or showing signs of mental retardation. With these learners, we only focus on teaching them life skills that would enable them to live in their communities.

Asked about how they are supported by the school to work with learners who are not ready for schooling, the teachers claimed that they receive support from the school and very few parents. They pointed out that sometimes the principals in their schools provide additional learning materials and resources needed to support the learners. In addition, their principals usually call parents' meetings in which they encourage parents to be involved in their children's education by assisting with homework and other school requirements that support learning.

Other teachers at their schools provide support by sharing their experiences of working with unprepared children and suggesting strategies they had used in the past and find effective. Regarding the parents, the participants claimed that there were very few parents who were willing to support teachers to educate their children. This was explained by Participant 1 who said,

There is no support from parents. When they are called for teacher-parent meetings to share concerns about their children, they don't come. Parents are bitter. They say teachers abuse their children when teachers report their children's learning disabilities. Some parents are really bitter, especially when the children are not coping. They say whatever they like to teachers, they do not want any advice from teachers.

Participant 2 also echoed the same sediments. She pointed out that,

Parents are not aware that educating a learner, especially young ones, is a three-legged pot that involves a parent, learner, and teacher. They think a teacher is the only figure who has to shoulder the responsibility of teaching a child. Even when learners are supposed to be helped at home, parents do not play their role.

According to these participants, the parents have an attitude of not being committed to their children's learning. These teachers explained that they learn this from their learners who sometimes report how their parents respond when they ask for assistance with homework. Participant 3 gave an example of a learner who once said about his parent's response, "My mother said she is not a teacher, she cannot do your work. She asked whether you want her to teach for you." From the viewpoint of these teachers, this attitude demonstrates parents' limited understanding of their involvement in their children's education.

7.4.2 Teachers' challenges of working with children who lack foundation skills

The challenges reported by teachers in this study, of working with children who are not ready for schooling included learners' lack of motivation; working with classes of mixed ability; lack of parental involvement, lack of appropriate teaching and learning resources, and teachers' lack of skills to deal with children who are not ready for formal schooling.

These teachers claimed that learners who have not been prepared have low motivation because of the learners' limited understanding of the purpose of school and its culture. This limited understanding frustrates such children and often leads them to dodge school or some classes, or simply refuse to go to school, but prefer to look after the family's animal stock.

Teaching a class that comprises learners who lack foundational skills is a challenge in many Lesotho classrooms, because there are limited resources and facilities to support these learners. For example, these teachers pointed out that the teaching and learning materials they use to teach these learners are not colourful and attractive. They claimed to use plain books, stones, and sticks to teach these children. Thus, from their viewpoint, the materials are unattractive and fail to attract learners' interest and motivate them.

Teachers in this study also pointed out that even though they had many years' experience teaching Grade 1, they lack the skills that are required to work with children who lack foundational skills and need remedial teaching. Participant 2 explained this by saying,

Learners who lack skills and are also disabled can be very distracting in class, they beat other learners, make a noise, and do many other unacceptable things. They need teachers who have remedial teaching and special education skills. We do not have such skills.

The other challenge that teachers in this study mentioned was parents' attitude and non-involvement. From their observation, parents believe that a school and the government is responsible for children's education. According to the parents' argument, the government should provide learning materials for their children and the school should ensure that children are taught. The teachers believed that the parents' attitude is a result of a limited understanding of education. They supported their view by explaining that even where the government provided children with books and stationery, parents do not ensure that children bring these learning materials along to school. This is what Participant 3 said when clarifying,

When these learners are given books or crayons to practise at home, their parents do not allow them to use them because they believe they are playing with them. Some of the parents even keep these materials at home for fear that their children would lose or damage them. More than often such materials never come back to school. This is frustrating because even if they are replaced the story repeats itself, learners leave their books and stationery at home.

There was also an observation among these teachers that sometimes when parents think they are doing what is good for their children they cause damage to their children's education. Participant 3 clarified this by saying,

Where we consider the ability of each learner and assign them different tasks, to parents is like we abuse learners who lack foundation skills. They complain that we undermine the intelligence of their children and threaten to complain to the Ministry of Education if we keep on discriminating against their children. They do not understand differentiation as a teaching strategy.

8. Discussion of Results

This study investigated Grade 1 teachers' perceptions of working with children who have not been prepared for formal education. Lesotho governments have made efforts through policies to encourage schools to establish facilities that prepare children who are about to start formal schooling. However, these government efforts have only been realised by very few schools and children are still kept at home by their parents for various reasons, which include not affording to pay for foundational education, and having a limited understanding of the importance of foundational education. As a result, many children start formal schooling unprepared. When they start formal school, these children struggle to adjust to the school environment, because they do not understand the school environment and culture. Most of them perform poorly academically and as a result, they are not able to progress to more advanced levels of education. They

are often made to repeat classes, pushed to the next level of education which they are not ready for, or leave school in frustration to find other means of life that make sense to them, such as tending animals.

The other observation made in this study is that there are various factors that influence how children who are not ready for formal schooling cope in the school environment. These factors include age, gender, socio-economic background, the availability of appropriate school facilities and resources, teachers' ability to deal with this calibre of children and parents' attitude towards supporting their children's education.

9. Conclusion

School readiness is very important for children who start formal schooling (Heerden et al., 2017). It has a positive influence on the future life of a child who has been prepared for every level of education (Pan et al., 2019). The future lives and careers of these children are predicted to be successful. This is usually different for children who are not prepared for the different stages of education. Their success in education, and life in general, could be unpredictable. This is why readiness has become a very important topic in the field of education. Children should be prepared before formal schooling by families or centres that offer foundational education programmes.

Many children leave education early because they are not prepared for schooling before they start school. Schools and parents do not offer any effective support to these children. As a result, some of these children are often promoted to the next level without a good foundation, have to repeat classes, or forced to drop out at this early stage of education out of frustration. All of these have devastating effects on the individual lives of these learners, their families, and their communities. In their individual lives they are likely to become adults who do not understand and appreciate formal schooling; who are unable to support the education of their children because of their limited understanding; who have low prospects of employment; and who are likely to perpetuate the state of poverty their parents experience. Other consequences include high rates of illiteracy, unemployment, poverty, crime, and other negative behaviours that are often influenced by the lack of good quality education in a community.

10. Recommendations

It is important that children are prepared for formal schooling before they start school. Therefore, the Government of Lesotho should address the issue of school readiness among children who are about to start formal schooling as established in this paper. The Government of Lesotho, through the Ministry of Education, should strengthen and monitor the implementation of early childhood education policies. Schools should be supported with facilities and resources that support children who start formal schooling. The curriculums of teacher education should include content aimed to equip teachers with the knowledge and skills that will enable them to support children who have not been prepared for formal schooling. Also, the government and other stakeholders in education in Lesotho should develop and offer educational programmes for parents that would

motivate and enable parents to enrol their children in the foundational education programmes and to be involved in their children's education.

11. Limitations

The limitations of this study is in the methodology. Firstly, the number of teachers who participated in this study was very small; therefore it cannot be taken to be representative of all Grade 1 teachers working in the public schools in Lesotho. Excluding the private schools in this study is another weakness, because the study does not provide a comprehensive picture of readiness among children who start formal schooling in Lesotho schools. A study that uses a larger size of participants, and be inclusive of all types of schools offering primary education is necessary.

12. References

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