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# Teachers' Challenges in Preparing Grade R Learners for School-readiness and Strategies Used to Activate Learner-readiness

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**Abstract.** The purpose of this study was to investigate the challenges that affect Grade R (kindergarten) learners' readiness for learning, and the strategies used to ensure learner-readiness when entering Grade 1. Learning readiness is an ongoing process from the beginning to the end of an individual's life. Learners at this early point in their lives (Foundation Phase) begin with their formal learning based on play, arithmetic, cultural activities, and reading and writing practice. The study engaged four teacher-participants: two Grade R teachers, and two Early Learnerhood Development practitioners from Grade 1. The case study research design was selected to elicit data through semi-structured open-ended interviews in natural settings to gain in-depth information which was analysed via the thematic analysis approach. The study findings revealed that teachers experienced challenges due to poor infrastructure, overcrowded classrooms, lack of resources, policy of passing all Grade R learners, admission of non-documented learners, and learners who skipped pre-school. To address these challenges which impacted Grade R learners' readiness to enter Grade 1, teachers were resourceful and planned innovative and interesting play-based lessons. This ensured that Grade R learners' readiness is largely play-based to develop them holistically by involving them in creative indoor and outdoor activities.

**Keywords:** early learnerhood development; interconnected system; learner school-readiness; teacher-preparedness; transition

## 1. Background of the study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the quality of Grade R learner-performance, and how it impacts on Grade 1 classroom activities. This was motivated by observing learners' inability (among others) to hold pencils correctly, cutting out pictures, writing their names, identifying phonics, letter recognition, and displaying underdeveloped gross and fine motor skills during

baseline assessment. The researcher discovered that Grade 1 learners were not ready to be taught the prescribed curriculum. This lack of readiness hampers teaching-learning processes which adversely affects curriculum coverage. Some teachers adjust the curriculum to accommodate the level of individual learner's readiness, while others become frustrated and demoralised leading to unfulfilled learning outcomes. Also, teachers and parents have different definitions of school-readiness: teachers place readiness in the social and self-regulatory domains, while parents see readiness as possessing basic academic skills. Since learners' school-readiness is crucial to predict their future success, the barriers to achieving successful academic outcomes should be circumvented to enhance school-readiness (Musonda & Matafwali, 2023). Importantly, research reveals that cognitive skills, social competence, and self-regulatory abilities provide a foundation for academic success, and that chronological age alone is not an effective indicator of school-readiness (Chere-Maphosa, 2022; Maphiri 2017). Further, Mcllroy (2018) attests that school-readiness is significant for learners transitioning from Grade R to Grade 1 as previous knowledge and skills learnt in Grade R carry-over into Grade 1. If this is absent then learners will struggle to successfully achieve the set outcomes of the curriculum which will impede academic progress. Nonetheless, school-readiness can be promoted through introducing a wide variety of class activities involving concrete experiences, and effectively encouraging learners to evoke their senses in learning situations (Chorrojprasert, 2020). In addition, Mokoena and Oosthuizen (2016, p. 13) believe that school-readiness also means "learning some other things that are not self-evidently academic - not reading, writing and arithmetic; they learn from using toys, from play, from touching objects, moving around, inducing their senses, and from [handling objects] to see how they work."

Globally, studies reveal that school-readiness is a process that engenders equity which enhances learners' performance. In Russia, school-readiness includes cognitive and personal components, as well as spontaneous behaviour that foster social skills. Cognitive development includes intellectual abilities, creative imaginations and non-verbal intelligence, while personal components consist of the ability to cooperate with peers, and when needed, to ask for help from teachers and peers (Nissksaya, 2018). Bell et al. (2018) add that maltreatment of learners in the Foundation Phase was associated with poor school-readiness in cognitive and non-cognitive domains which adversely affected learners' all-round progress.

In China, Shrivastava et al. (2019) believe that school-readiness sets the trajectory for learners' successful future through a positive self-concept which encourages learners towards attaining their holistic development potential. Similarly in India, it is believed that school-readiness can prepare learners for future success through creative teaching-learning situations to assist learners in exploiting their innate potential (Shrivastava et al., 2019). In this regard, Wolf and McCoy (2019) advocate the need to close the research gap on school-readiness in India by focusing on the primary aim of school-readiness by recognising characteristics linked to school-readiness in learners which led to the early detection and remediation of learning deficiencies.

In Ghana, school-readiness is associated with five developmental domains: social, cognitive, emotional, physical, and language – beginning from Grade R (Wolf & McCoy, 2019). In Nigeria the priority is the holistic development of learners aged between three to four years to advance school-readiness (Adeniyi, 2021). In Jamaica, school-readiness prioritises skills like speaking, observing, role-playing, and listening to improve learning within an interactive classroom environment (Harris-Mortley, 2019).

In South Africa, the current National Curriculum and Assessment Policy (CAPS, 2011) stipulates the expected assessment standards which incorporates the National Protocol for Assessment Grades R–12 (2012), and the National Policy about the Programme and Promotion Requirements of the National Curriculum Statement Grade R–12 (2012). These assessment standards are used as a yardstick to determine Grade R learners' school-readiness.

According to De Witt (2017), school-readiness illustrates growth influenced by literacy and processes of human development. McIlroy (2017) elaborates that school-readiness is a yardstick for determining the level of the social, cognitive, emotional, physical, and emotional skills of a learner. School-readiness is acquired when a learner is holistically ready to withstand the pressure of teaching-learning in the formal school context (De Witt, 2017). Importantly, De Witt, Du Toit and Franzsen (2020) believe that the purpose of school-readiness is to ensure learners' successful transition into formal education through the collective responsibility of supportive stakeholders in the society, community, school, and in the home environment.

The above assertions by De Witt (2017) reveal that school-readiness is multidimensional as it includes motor, cognitive, social, emotional, language, and physical development. In addition, Davin (2016) believes that school-readiness is inextricably intertwined with several components that are inseparable which develops the learner as a unique individual growing at her/his pace but influenced by environmental factors that contribute to their holistic development.

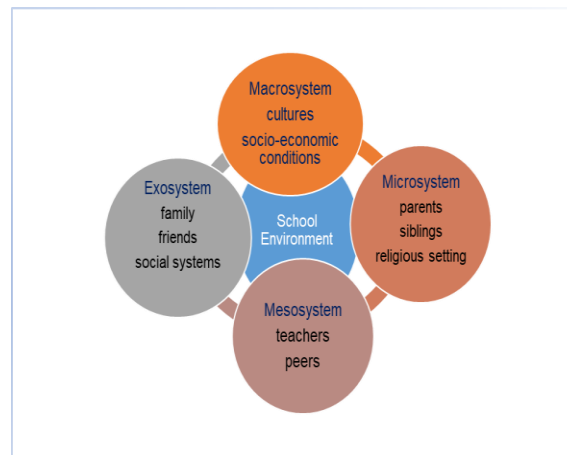
Based on research findings, learners' readiness and hindrances impeding learners' readiness were identified during data collection as challenges that affect Grade R learners' readiness for learning, which also influences the utilisation of types of strategies to implement to ensure learner-readiness when entering Grade 1. The following research questions were formulated to address the phenomenon under investigation:

- What are the challenges that teachers encounter when facilitating learner-readiness in Grade R?
- How do Grade R teachers overcome these challenges?

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

The study adopted Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory. Bronfenbrenner (2000) believed that this theory can be enacted when the learner is viewed within the interconnected system. In describing these interconnected systems, Bronfenbrenner (2000) contends that what happens in one circular level, will affect

other systems, and cause a ripple effect for further change. The ecological models describe the development of the learner in terms of direct or indirect influences within the learner's social context like the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem (Rasheedah et al., 2019). An illustration of the systems is depicted below in Figure 1.1.



**Figure 1: Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2000)**

The ecological systems theory generally involves parents, siblings, the extended family, friends, and personal factors (Davin et al., 2016). Interaction within the systems can discourage and/or encourage reactions from others. In addition, process factors are samples of interconnection that happen in a complex system, while contextual factors refer to schools, local community, classrooms, and families. Further, time factors are significant and occur by maturing and developing within the environment. Bronfenbrenner (2000) contends that the environment in which an individual grows up affects every aspect of the individual's life. As such, social factors determine one's way of thinking, feeling, and likes and dislikes (De Witt, 2017). In other words, the ecological systems reveal various interconnected factors that influence a learner's development. For instance, if learners have a sense of their environment, then they will understand their settings.

In this study, the ecological systems theory was used to understand development processes relating to Grade R learners' readiness for Grade 1, how learners interact within the different systems, and their understanding of being physically and mentally immersed in their environment. Moodley and Moodley (2018) claim that the ecological systems theory correlates with learners' holistic development by incorporating various factors (processes, environment, linking systems, and human beings) that impact learning and human development. This theory assisted the researcher to understand what impedes Grade R learners' readiness for success in Grade 1, as well as to find answers to the research questions. Elliot and Davis (2020) and Rasheedah et al. (2019) explain that microsystems and mesosystems show the interconnection of learners with those around them (teachers, peers, siblings, parents, and the community) and that they can be influenced by them positively and negatively in terms of language, social interactions, physical activities, and their use of intellect. Thus, if learners are not

well-developed and lovingly nurtured at home, their normal development will be hindered (Yzel, 2017).

### **3. Literature Review**

#### **3.1 Preparation of learners for school-readiness**

In Nepal, studies reveal that learning and teaching processes which excludes the learning readiness component, affects the promotion of learners' educational achievement. Such a process is less effective and negatively influences education standards (Dangol & Shrestha, 2019). Dangol and Shrestha (2019) add that through the learning readiness process, learners' academic achievement is enhanced to create favourable circumstances for effective teaching and learning. According to Gove et al. (2017), in most African countries, the low level of Grade 1 reading has negatively impacted learning readiness due to insufficient time for reading activities. Studies reveal that 250 million learners in sub-Saharan Africa are unable to acquire basic literacy skills that will enable them to be ready to learn to read. To exacerbate the problem, the policy related to non-fee paying schools has increased learner-enrolment, created a shortage of teachers, and led to overcrowded classrooms (Gove et al., 2017). For example, in Ethiopia, learning readiness is impeded by insufficient human and physical resources, while in Kenya interventions to promote learning readiness through creative ECD programmes have been developed for sustainability, as well as for emotional, social, physical, and mental readiness (Gove et al., 2017). However, most learners in South Africa are not equipped with the basic knowledge and skills (which should have been acquired in Grade R) when entering Grade 1; hence, intervention strategies based on a perceptual-motor programme for enhancing learning and school-readiness for Grade R learners were suggested (Erasmus et al., 2016). In this regard, Venter (2022), confirms that young learners' ability to receive and understand purposeful instruction is based on the level of learners' learning readiness.

Different studies recommend further research to acquire an incisive understanding of this topic. The DBE (2019) established Grade R classes at most South African primary schools by incorporating Grade R as part of the Foundation Phase (FP). Accordingly, the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement [CAPS] (2011) for FP advocates the use of the five senses as a strategy for the development of various domains (like gross and fine motor skills) that necessitate Grade R learners to be equipped with the relevant knowledge, attitudes, values and skills within their learning environment. Evans (2020) concurs that in teaching-learning situations, the learner's level of understanding is significant when considering implementing intervention strategies, in addition to interpreting how the learner connects with the immediate and larger environment.

Rasheedah et al. (2019) believe that learner-readiness is influenced by the environment, situation, affective needs, guiding policies, and people in the immediate environment. However, challenges are experienced by teachers when developing readiness activities in Grade R due to overcrowding, the absence of professional development, insufficient learning materials, inadequate infrastructure, and the lack of qualified teachers, (Excell & Lington 2018).

### 3.2 Strategies to promote learners' school-readiness

Countries like South Africa experience problems that have a negative influence on Grade 1 teaching and learning. Nissksaya (2018), advises that in Russia reasonable teacher-learner ratios, astute time-management, high quality of teaching in Grade R, and a balanced curriculum enhances readiness.

Additionally, Wangke et al. (2021) suggest that establishing transition teams to develop support programmes for the future, may be beneficial. Also, the interaction between the family and the school enhances successful relationships when considering a Grade R learner's age as a key factor to strengthen school-readiness via harmonious parent-school partnerships, and the reorganising of playgrounds for the promotion of outdoor activities according to required lesson units. Ring et al. (2016) state that in Ireland, the reduction of overcrowding in classrooms and the provision of sufficient learning materials is a priority.

Further, Peckham (2018) mentions that in the UK, developing readiness as the foundation of success, begins with promoting real-life experiences throughout early learning which builds personal characteristics (such as resilience) to cope the realities of the world. Also, Peckham (2018) emphasises the promotion and connection of learners' customs and beliefs during their early years of development until maturation. Pan et al. (2019) state that in Asia, Grade R readiness involves self-regulation in the personal, social and emotional spheres, in addition to learning strategies that could assist struggling young learners to draw on the skills of their peers.

In Bangladesh, developing readiness in early learning involves "creating opportunities for early learning, maternal and learner nutrition, avoiding infection, and responsive caregiving" (Pitchik et al., 2021, p. 2). Although studies cited in the Global Report (2018) reveal that 'ready' learners can acquire the minimum skills or competencies in Central Africa, Harris-Mortley (2019) attests that limited access especially for lower socioeconomic groups to pre-primary education hinders learners' readiness in most African countries. Similarly, Bhise and Sunawat (2016) assert that learners from lower-income families underperform in readiness activities and Mathematics. Hence, Ethiopia embarked on an emergency literacy and mathematical skills programme for learners from low socioeconomic backgrounds; thus *Save the Learner Campaign* was introduced (Maphiri, 2018).

In South Africa, studies by Stellenbosch University [RESEP] (2013) recommended the improvement of teacher-training, professional development, upgrading of qualifications, and support from stakeholders in the development of readiness-facilitated learning through organised play. In concurrence, Erasmus et al. (2016) suggest that training workshops for teachers to become more knowledgeable and skilled will lead to understanding how to overcome readiness barriers in the school environment. Lastly, but importantly, South African studies emphasise that challenges in developing readiness can be overcome but require learners to

experience academic success to mitigate the risk of becoming dropouts (Maluleke et al., 2021).

## **4. Methodology**

### **4.1 Research design**

This paper selected a qualitative case study research design which was suitable because it aptly addressed the readiness challenges and real-life problems in early education (Aspers & Corte, 2019). The case study approach enabled me to gain deep insight into Grade R learners' readiness for Grade 1 in natural settings (Creswell, 2014) which helped me to answer the research questions on the challenges (and solutions) teachers experience when they prepare learners for formal school-readiness. The lived-experiences of the teacher-participants and their verbal responses to the questions on the interview schedule helped to understand the reality of Grade R teaching and learning regarding the development of readiness.

### **4.2 Research locale**

This study was conducted in the Limpopo Province of South Africa at two schools from different circuits in the Capricorn South District of the Capricorn Municipality. Both schools are ranked as quintile three. School A is situated in a rural area, and School B is situated in a suburban area. School A was chosen by the District to pilot the Molteno Project for the development of readiness, and the training of teachers to prepare readiness play activities during indoor and outdoor activities. School B was not part of the Molteno Project.

### **4.3 Selection of the participants**

Participants in this study were purposively selected using the case study approach. A qualitative study requires in-depth sampling for selecting information-rich cases (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). Additionally, Ames, Glenton and Lewin (2019) advise that the researcher should select participants to contribute relevant and comprehensive information concerning the area of research when using purposive sampling. In this study, four teachers who taught FP learners were selected as participants because they facilitated and developed learners' readiness at their respective schools. The sample size was manageable and allowed the researcher to expeditiously collect sufficient data from the participants. The participant-teachers had different experiences and techniques in developing Grade R learners for readiness at their various schools. Both schools had an intake of learners who were with and without preschool experience, and both were situated in rural villages. Before the interviews the participants signed the consent forms. Pseudonyms (P1 – 4) were used for confidentiality purposes to protect the participants' information, identities, and school names.

### **4.4 Research instruments**

The teacher-interview guide (TIG) and the classroom observation schedule (COS) were used as instruments to collect data. Interviews involved asking research questions and eliciting responses from the participants (Kabir, 2018). Face-to-face interviews were conducted by posing open-ended questions, and half an hour was allotted to answer these questions. Through the TIG, I could establish the participants' real-life, authentic, and challenging experiences which helped us to

answer the two research questions. McMillan and Schumacher (2014) state that observations foster an in-depth understanding of the participant's behaviour in context. Through the COS, I obtained a holistic picture of what teachers and learners experienced when involved in readiness activities by observing (and aligning to literature) how learners responded during the four lesson presentations from the participant-teachers which led to answering the two stated research questions. The different methods and processes used for generating data (semi-structured interviews, observation, and document analysis) strengthened the validity and reliability of the study. The assumption we make as researchers is that Grade R learner-readiness is not at its intended level and consequently it impacts negatively on Grade 1 teaching. The participants' experiences, explanations, and arguments justified this assumption.

#### **4.5 Data collection**

Data was generated through semi-structured interviews. Pett et al. (2012) state that conducting semi-structured interviews involves exploring predetermined areas of interest with possible prompts to guide the conversation. Prior determiners helped to facilitate the conversation between the researcher and the participants. Repetition of research questions, where needed, was allowed for participants to clarify and interpret them prior to responding. Also, for elaboration and clarity purposes, the probing technique was employed.

In-depth, rich, and primary information was obtained from Grade R teachers. After the interviews, I determined and identified the differences and similarities of crucial data extracted during interviews (De Vos et al., 2014). According to standard procedures, all the audio-recorded interviews (with consent) were transcribed verbatim and thematically analysed. From this, researchers obtained an understanding of the participating teachers' attitudes toward developing readiness, and how they assessed readiness in their FP classes.

#### **4.6 Data analysis**

Thematic analysis was applied as the data analysis method because it was deemed relevant and appropriate to qualitative studies; in this case, the main statements from participants were identified, and interpreted via authentic reasoning from raw data as evidence (Hunter et al., 2019). The thematic analysis method involves assembling, segmenting, and dismantling patterns for meaningful inferences from the generated data (Hunter et al., 2019). The researcher transcribed the collected data from participants, then interpreted, synthesised, and combined all relevant information into a single unit. Data analysis, according to McMillan and Schumacher (2014), is essentially a process of identifying patterns and relationships by arranging data according to categories. During the analysis process, I first listened repeatedly to the audio-recordings and watched the videos from the captured clips, after which I transcribed verbatim each participant's responses. Next, I analytically examined the four responses from the participants. Lastly, the information was dismantled and reassembled.



## 5. Findings and Discussion

### 5.1 Challenges teachers encounter when facilitating learner-readiness

In determining the teachers' challenges, I inquired about barriers they encountered when facilitating readiness activities to gauge how these affected learners' progress in the different classes. The excerpts below articulate participants' views:

*P1: We must make two reports and two schedules. It is difficult. We must send the Department and Molteno reports to parents. Unfortunately, due to the lack of resources, we failed to send the Molteno reports. Molteno people want their schedules and their reports. Aish! Learners' who did not go to preschool cannot trace, hold pencils, do colouring, and do not know the colours. And they are not used to the classroom environment. Some learners don't have identity documents. When I say I have 40 learners in my classroom, I don't count the undocumented learners. These learners are not registered on the SA-SAMS. The government doesn't know them. They are not included when we feed our learners.*

*P2: The small classroom structure congests areas in the class. They cannot explore more. They have only a fantasy area. They get bored of using one area. They need all areas to develop in totality. Theft, some of the apparatus are stolen, which is why I lack the theme apparatus, like the theme of water. I lack such apparatus. Parents are not involved in their learner's progress. The lack of storybooks is a problem. I record marks using the rubrics and mark sheets to SA-SAMS, and with Molteno we download and develop the Molteno report. The challenge is resources because we must give learners two reports.*

*P3: Eish! There are lots of challenges. Overcrowding in the classroom is a problem. We have large groups of learners in a classroom which is a problem. You find that many learners are not coping. When I put toys on their tables, they just fold their hands and don't want to mix with other learners. There is a shortage of toys, young learners learn through play, and they need puzzles, threading items, and storybooks. For participation, they don't use puzzles as they do not have confidence.*

*P4: Eih! The challenge is overcrowding in classes. At least, if we had 30 to 40 learners in our classes, it's okay. Presently, we have 75 learners in a class, and we feel fine working with these numbers because we need jobs. It is difficult to assess them sometimes. We cannot reach out to all the learners. It takes time to discover that the learners have challenges in the process of developing readiness. It is also difficult to lay down areas because our classes are small due to class numbers. Also, boys are bullying others in our class.*

According to the above evidence, P1 and P2 have common challenges based on duplication of reports, mark sheets, and schedules for the Department of Education (DoE) and for the Molteno Project. The lack of resources also caused delays in handing two reports to the learners. Further, P2, P3, and P4 have the

same challenge about overcrowding which was confirmed during observations. The challenge of overcrowding had an impact on Grade R learners' readiness which is supported by Gove et al. (2017) who agree that learning readiness can be impacted negatively by overcrowding in classrooms. Also, Harcourt (2018) and Excell and Linington (2018) state that poor infrastructure can hamper learners' readiness, while Guner and Kartel (2019) recommend the adjustment of sports fields for physical development to enhance readiness and overcome overcrowding. Additionally, P1 and P2 complained about the lack of resources to print out the required reports. Hence, Excel and Linington (2018) explain that the lack of resources, infrastructure, and professional development may hamper the development of readiness in Grade R. Moreover, Harcourt (2018) cautions that the interpretation of the curriculum in a limited way can contribute negatively to the development of learners' readiness.

Mishalka et al. (2018) confirm that the eradication of such challenges can benefit Grade R readiness development if teaching approaches are adapted to suit the competency of all learners in Grade R. According to McIlroy (2018), school-readiness should be measured by identifying how the learners cope, behave, and interact with peers. The challenges that emerged included the shortage of qualified teachers, inadequate teaching and learning resources, and inappropriate infrastructure. Since this study is underpinned by the ecological systems theory which focuses on human development, Nair, Radhakrishnan, and Olusanya (2023) confirm that human development is a lifelong process that considers one's insight concerning interaction with the environment and its challenges - which may affect readiness.

Furthermore, P1 was the only one who found it difficult to work with learners who did not previously attend pre-schools. This hampers the process of developing readiness to ensure that these learners are ready for Grade 1 by the end of the year. Harris-Mortley (2019) attests that learners who did not attend preschool experience more challenges in Grade R. Hence, Bouchane et al. (2019) recommend attending preschool in that it provides a safe environment for learners to grow, build family and social values, access nutrition, and acquire early learning skills to ultimately break the cycle of poverty. Moreover, P1 commented on having undocumented learners in her class which was different from other participants - the researcher considered this as not being a major obstacle to learner-readiness.

The above findings and discussions revealed that the common challenges encountered by the teachers in shaping learners' readiness included: compiling reports, overcrowded classrooms, poor infrastructure, lack of instructional materials and resources, and difficulty in teaching learners who did not attend pre-schools. Bruwer, Hartell and Steyn (2014) contend that learners who never attended a preschool become traumatised when confronted with challenges in formal learning situations. Chere-Maphosa (2022) asserts that learners who attended preschool would complete primary and secondary school timeously, and would not repeat grades or drop-out because they started school on time. Venter (2022) confirms that poverty is a cause of learners not attending preschools

even though parents receive learner-support grants. There is also the need to improve or rebuild infrastructure (teaching-learning equipment, adequate physical facilities, and expanding school grounds, among others) for quality readiness development (Venter, 2022). Munnik and Smith, (2019) view school-readiness as a significant component that guides learners towards regular attendance, completion of the phase, enrolment in the formal school sector, and preparation to transition successfully from Grade R to Grade 1. Since learners are not naturally born to be ready for formal schooling, they need to be exposed and developed in a different context from home, to acquire the relevant knowledge, values, and functional skills.

## 5.2 Strategies teachers use in developing Grade R learner-readiness

After eliciting the information on the challenges that the teachers encountered in shaping learners' readiness, I also asked them, how they responded to these challenges when facilitating learner-readiness. The question was aimed at measuring the effectiveness of teachers' strategies to overcome the impediments that affect Grade R learner-readiness. The participants' responses below reflect their strategies:

*P1: In January, I tried to assist these learners. If it is not working, I call parents and we communicate and assist the learners. I give the learners the homework where the parents help them. We have a notebook in which I communicate with each parent. The parent will comment on how she helped the learner, and I will also comment. That is working for us. We compromise and we give our registered learners food to share with them. The fruit day is stressful; you wish that some learners could be absent because each learner gets one fruit. The fruits are for 40 learners, and we cannot cut the fruits and share them. I bring apparatus from home, toothpaste, soap, toothbrushes, and dolls to introduce a particular theme. I try to share the food by giving smaller amounts to accommodate everyone.*

*P2: I sometimes request parents to assist as I created a WhatsApp group. Learners are requested to bring boxes to create dolls' houses that we can use in class. I said we did not have enough resources, then I created the apparatus myself. I also Google and print the relevant resources in colour.*

*P3: For those learners who do not cope and struggle to socialise, as a teacher, I must have compassion, and encourage, motivate, and tell them that they are here to learn. If that continues, I report the matter to the DH and the principal to assist me in calling the parents so that I can talk to them to assist the learner to cope well and talk. For the larger groups, given the lack of resources and space, I divide them into twelve or eleven so that I can manage them. For the shortage of resources, at times if I have enough money, I use it to buy two or three puzzle boxes. I also ask my learners to come with bottles and bottle-tops and I use the waste materials to create resources.*

*P4: I ask parents to allow the learners to bring their dolls and toys to school, to introduce the themes. After that, I give them back to the learners to take them home. Due to overcrowding, I divided them into groups and layout only two areas. When other learners are with me, others are in the laid out areas, while others must sit on the mat and fold their arms and do nothing. Sometimes I develop my own resources.*

The articulations from the participants as indicated above reflect their proactive and innovative qualities to respond to the challenges they encountered in different situations. All the participants highlighted how they involved parents as partners in eradicating barriers, although their strategies were different. Participant 1 circumvented some challenges by involving parents from the beginning of the year, and created a parent-teacher notebook for each learner to communicate messages to the parent, while P2 indicated that she initiated a WhatsApp group where she communicated with parents to assist learners on various school matters. Both P1 and P2 emphasised the technique of galvanising parent-support through effective communication channels. Encouragingly, P3's solution for learners who struggled to integrate socially with other learners in class, advised that we must show compassion and care to motivate such learners; and when these fail she followed protocol to call a meeting with the parents. Participant 3 differed from involving parents immediately - she started by applying her skills, knowledge, and strategies to resolve problems before involving the parents, while P4 involved parents for resource purposes, especially when she wanted to introduce a new theme and did not have adequate teaching and learning materials. Regarding resources, P2 indicated how she communicated with parents on WhatsApp groups to request learners to bring boxes that they could use to build model houses.

Wolf and McCoy (2018) criticise parents who do not value their child's early education especially in sub-Saharan countries, adding that their illiteracy and a negative perception of schooling harm learners' educational progress. In addition, Serede and Mwoma (2022) believe that parents define learning readiness as merely counting ability, object naming, and letter identification. Michalska et al. (2018) highlight that an effective parent-teacher partnership is an important component for shaping the readiness of Grade R learners.

The responses revealed that each participant encountered different challenges, and they resolved them differently. For example, P1 indicated that they adapted their stance on food distribution by sharing registered learners' food with the unregistered learners, while P2 circumvented the shortage of resources by creating her own apparatus after googling the relevant websites to develop readiness. Participant 3 stated that she divides learners into smaller groups to resolve the challenge of overcrowding and shortage of resources, while P4 separates the learners into smaller groups by designating two areas such that when one group of learners is with her, others sit on the mat and fold their arms. Distressingly, P1 had a different challenge to other participants in that she was trying to manage her stress levels caused by all the challenges she faced. Jahreie (2022) agrees that the healthy growth of learners is important to learn and begin

the process of being aware of family-centred values and support to access early learning, nutrition, and healthcare.

The action by P1 is also supported by Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1954). This theory agrees with the DBE's National School Nutrition Programme [NSNP] (2002) which was aimed at fostering quality education according to the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG, 2023). Food as a basic physiological need is a priority and must be provided to learners at different schools to ascertain that the SGD 4 goal is achieved by introducing the NSNP; food is provided to learners as a basic need to enhance learners' active learning, and in the process short-term hunger is alleviated. Further, P1's response to using Google to mitigate the lack of resources differs from how she responded concerning the use of teachers' guides from the DBE when responding to the questions: What activities do you use to develop readiness, and how you develop readiness in your class?

To alleviate challenges, Excell and Linington (2018) believe that teachers need to be positive, competent, hands-on, and creative in their classroom environment even if they experience challenges. Since all participants have their uniqueness to circumvent the challenge of resources in their various classes, we see P1 take the needed resources from home, P2 and P4 created their own resources, P2 googled for colourful pictures, and P3 at times used her money to purchase resources like puzzles or used waste materials and bottle-tops to create her resources. Mashrabjonovich and To'lqinboy Qizi (2022, p. 84) confirm that "Improvisation brings attractiveness to pedagogical activity, helps to instantly find a successful way out of the most unexpected situation, [increases] pupil's interest in learning, and contributes to the realisation of teachers' creative ideas."

From the above excerpts and discussion, it was evident that the teachers strove to respond positively to the challenges they encountered in different ways. Their common ways and strategies to overcome the challenges they encountered included: proper and constant communication with parents by giving notice, and creating notebooks and WhatsApp groups as communication tools; showing compassion and empathy towards learners to motivate them; creating learning materials and involving parents to assist in providing more learning resource materials; and developing and applying different and innovative teaching strategies to address learners' difficulties.

The quality of Early Childhood Education (ECD) is developed systematically through successions in learning spheres; however, opportunities can be hampered if learners did not attain knowledge and skills through not attending a preschool. Therefore, Grade R is a critical part of FP to ground learners' learning as it encourages learners to imbibe important social and academic skills. The findings also revealed that communication is critical in overcoming challenges; however, Adams-bedding Ojugbele and Moletsane (2019) believe that the socioeconomic aspects are more powerful obstacles that hamper progress because most South African parents are poverty-stricken. Lastly, the lack of relevant learning resources might hamper learners' ability to develop and acquire social skills

needed to adequately prepare Grade R learners' to progress successfully and smoothly into Grade 1 (Adams-Ojugbele & Moletsane, 2019).

## **7. Conclusion**

The purpose of the study was to explore and understand the challenges that the teachers experience when developing readiness in Grade R learners. The study's results revealed that most teachers experience challenges when developing learner-readiness. These challenges affected the teachers' morale such that they had no option but to persevere because they wanted to hold on to their jobs. The teachers were hindered in doing their best for learners due mainly to overcrowding, and the lack of relevant and adequate resources which deprived learners of the opportunity to utilise teaching aids meant for their holistic development. It was evident that DBE policies and guidelines were ineffective because of several challenges that affected the success of learner-readiness in Grade R for transitioning into Grade 1. Despite all the challenges impeding progress into Grade 1, teachers were willing to improvise for the sake of the learners in their care. It is envisaged that this study will create awareness among all role-players to become committed to alleviate the dire situation in FP classrooms.

## **8. Recommendations**

To address the challenges regarding Grade R readiness for Grade 1 teaching and learning, teachers must prepare detailed learning plans and routines as described in the DBE's Grade R Resource Kit. This would ensure that Grade R learners' readiness is play-based to develop them holistically by engaging in indoor and outdoor play-activities. These activities would also develop learners' imagination, cognition, gross and fine motor skills, and encourage interacting freely with peers. The DBE must also ensure that the Resource Kit is written in all official languages to enhance readiness-development, quality teaching, effective learning in Grade R, and the smooth implementation of activities and strategies in daily teaching-learning situations. The Limpopo Department of Basic Education (LDoE) in partnership with Molteno should ensure that all Grade R schools in Limpopo receive tablets which are valuable when teachers want to assess, read stories, and mark registers on their tablets. The LDoE and Molteno officials should also avoid instructing teachers and schools to duplicate schedules and learners' reports so as to not overburden teachers by focusing on paperless administration during this 4IR era. Moreover, there must be two Grade R classes to ensure that learners who are not ready to shift into Grade 1, proceed to a second Grade R year to be assisted and developed for successful transition into Grade One.

## **9. Limitations**

The limitation of this study is linked to the sample size which included only two schools and four teachers that prevented the generalisation of results. Also, since these schools were accessed during the fourth term, there were time-constraints and limited opportunities to peruse more classroom and school documents for analysis. Fortunately, both schools were not affected by the final exam as they used continuous assessment to measure learners' performance. The limited sample of four teachers enabled me to make-sense of how readiness is promoted

in Grade R for transitioning into Grade 1 as I obtained an in-depth understanding of the challenges, and the implementation of strategies to circumvent them.

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