

Do existing policy and teacher guide documents address the requirements for emergent literacy in grade R?

A B S T R A C T The Department of Education has issued a large number of policy and teacher guides to give assistance to teachers in the Foundation Phase including those in Grade R. However, a review of these documents revealed that of the 12 documents only three were specific to Grade R and of these only one made a brief reference to the development of emergent literacy. This article argues that it is important to incorporate the appropriate content for emergent literacy in all the documents and not merely present simplified Grade 1 literacy content to Grade R learners if we are to prepare them for formal instruction in grade 1. The content that is regarded as the core of emergent literacy is discussed and recommendations are made on how to upgrade the present documents.

Keywords: Department of Education, emergent literacy; pre literacy, Grade R, guide documents

1. Introduction and background

The school based Grade R programme is fairly new in South Africa having been formalised as policy in the White Paper 5 (Department of Education) in 2001. Prior to this, the Interim Policy for Early Childhood Development (ECD) (Department of Education 1996) served to outline very broad guidelines for the provision of early learning within all sectors. After the unfavourable national results on reading in the Foundation Phase (Report of Systemic Evaluation- Department of Education (a) 2003), the Department of Education (DoE) devoted more attention to literacy in the Foundation Phase in which Grade R, a class for five to six year olds forms the lowest level.

To strengthen the base for literacy development, a host of documents were produced to support teachers in their role of teaching language in the Foundation Phase. These included

the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) Grades R-9 Home Languages (Department of Education 2002), the Teacher's guide for the development of learning programmes: Foundation Phase (Department of Education (a) 2003) and Teacher's guide for the development of learning programmes: Languages (Department of Education (b) 2003), Teaching reading in the early grades (Department of Education (a) 2008) and Grade R Practical Ideas (Department of Education (b) 2008), Foundations for Learning Assessment Framework- Foundation Phase: Literacy (Department of Education (c) 2008), The Government Gazette Republic of South Africa (Department of Education (d) 2008), the National Curriculum Statement; General Education and training; Assessment guide for Foundation Phase Grades R-3 (Department of Education (c) 2003) and National Policy on Assessment and Qualifications for schools in the General Education and Training Band (Department of Education (d) 2003).

Although this comprehensive list of documents was intended to provide information about Grade R as well, it seems as if the documents did not address the skills necessary for emergent literacy for Grade R learners to prepare them for the formal structure of the Grade 1 class. This information gap also has implications for Grade R teachers' ability to develop a programme for learners' pre literacy skills.

To establish whether the contents of the documents are sufficient to provide the necessary information to teach emergent literacy, this research aims to achieve the following:

- To outline the content on emergent literacy and indicate key concepts
- To analyse policy and Teacher Guide Language documents to determine if these documents address the requirements for emergent literacy
- To find out if the curriculum documents provide Grade R teachers with the guidance they need to develop a programme for pre literate-learners
- To provide guidelines for appropriate documentation for Grade R teachers

2. Theoretical background

A literature review is conducted to explain what is entailed in emergent literacy and the key concepts associated with pre literacy. The review also highlights what skills are needed for Grade R learners to benefit from formal learning in Grade 1. It also focuses on the meaning, approaches and, ways of assessing successful acquisition including other pertinent concepts required in the acquisition of emergent literacy with the intention of supporting the position that is taken when the documents were analysed.

2.1 The meaning of emergent literacy

Connor, Morrison & Slominski's (2006:665-666) give a definition of emergent literacy which explains it as those skills, knowledge, and attitudes that develop prior to conventional forms of reading; this fits the purpose of this research because it captures the same aspects that are discussed in the research. The definition also relates well with the manner in which the language curriculum is structured and will assist in the analysis of the documents.

Emergent literacy can also be referred to as pre literacy but differs from literacy which is commonly defined as the ability to read, write and understand (McVicker 2007:18). It is an indication that the learner's communication and reading skills are in an emerging state which could serve as a foundation for reading and writing (Connor & Tiedmann 2005:1).

For purposes of this research it must be emphasised that emergent literacy is not synonymous with early literacy which suggests that the child already has some knowledge of reading and writing (Gunning 2007: 86). In this way the content of basic formal reading will not be confused with content on emergent literacy. Moreover, this approach will avoid presenting a watered down Grade 1 reading programme as a programme on emergent literacy. It will therefore be necessary to highlight those concepts that are regarded as indicative of emergent literacy; background information is needed to establish whether these concepts appear in the listed teacher guides and policy documents from the DoE.

Most researchers (Hawken, Johnston & McDonnell 2005:233; Justice & Pullen 2003:100) agree that there are certain concepts or skills that must be referred to in any discussion about emergent literacy. These include book knowledge and appreciation; phonological awareness which includes oral and vocabulary skills; alphabet knowledge; and print awareness or early writing. They form the core content that is associated with pre reading and pre writing skills and also serves as criteria to determine whether a learner is preliterate or not. Learners must have the specific knowledge to demonstrate these skills.

With regard to book knowledge and appreciation learners must show interest in books by viewing pictures and listening to stories. They must have the ability to retell stories told to them, to predict what follows in a story, to create their own stories and to get involved in book-related activities (Yeh 2003:514). However, the contention is that referring to access to books and frequent storytelling as aspects of emergent literacy becomes meaningless if there is no indication that books, such as story books are essential for early language and comprehension development which are prerequisite for formal reading.

The second thing learners must know to be regarded as pre-literate is phonology. Learners must be phonologically competent by showing the ability to hear and manipulate sounds in words. Phonology involves acquiring the sounds of consonants and vowels and knowing how speech sounds are formed in order to understand phonics and spelling better in grade 1. Knowledge of words is necessary to obtain sufficient vocabulary for grade-level reading comprehension which is implicated in academic success. In addition, learners must realise that reading essentially involves two basic processes, deciphering print and knowing what the print means (Center 1998 16).

Alphabet knowledge is part of what must be learned and refers to learners' ability to identify letters and understand that letters of the alphabet are written symbols that can be named and learned separately. The researcher wishes to draw attention to the shift that has occurred in the extent to which learners are expected to know the alphabet. In the past teaching preschool children to identify letters was seen as developmentally inappropriate (Hawken et al 2005: 233); however in recent times preschool programmes are expected to give optimal support for cognitive and language development. Knowledge of the alphabet is one of the skills that are known to predict future reading achievement (Gunning 2005:142). Thus, failing to give children literacy experiences until they are school age, especially those who have never received appropriate language stimulation in the early years can severely limit the reading and writing levels ultimately obtained (Han, Roskos, Christie, Mandzuk & Vukelich 2005: 333-335).

The latest trend in emergent literacy also deals with a departure from traditional practice on pre writing skills. There is a move towards teaching not only print awareness, but also early writing skills in preschool. Knowing that putting individual alphabet letters together forms words and that a number of words make a sentence which ultimately bears meaning has now become an aspect of pre-literacy (Gunning 2005: 86; Hawken, et al 2005:233). This, however, does not detract from the fact that learners must recognise that print rather than pictures carries the meaning of stories; that what the learner says and others say can be written down and read; that reading is done from left to right, top to bottom and that a book is read from front to back. The importance of letter knowledge should not be underestimated because it is regarded as integral to phonological awareness and can be taught as a pre-literacy skill. Children learn faster when the alphabet is matched for instance, to key characters in a story. However it is important to note that this does not imply that learners would be involved in the formal learning structures.

This standpoint is seen as relevant for counteracting deficiencies in fine motor development that are typical of poor learners in Grade 1 and that causes them to trail behind their peers in formal writing skills. The rationale behind this standpoint is similar to that which gave rise to the introduction of literacy programmes such as Doors to Discovery Literacy, Creative Curriculum for Literacy and the Language Enrichment Activities Programme (LEAP) which advocate this change.

Additional content on emergent literacy usually found in teacher guide documents relates to the manner in which pre literacy skills are promoted. Detail on viable approaches and principles to the teaching of concepts referred to earlier is usually provided.

2.2 Approaches for the teaching of emergent literacy

The role of Teacher Guide documents for ECD within the context of this research is to provide explicit information for the development of programmes on how to promote pre-literacy. Such documents are seen as capacity building resources and provide content such as strategies for allocating teaching time; designing and using learning resources; dealing with different classroom environments and developing listening, speaking, reading and writing skills (Han et al 2005: 334). The documents provide a support structure for the teacher albeit one that conforms to the prescribed plan. They are basically intended to develop Grade R teachers' teaching competence and to give advice on challenging issues.

While it is true that a good mode for meeting individual learners' needs is a learner-initiated, learner-directed, educator-supported play that is developmentally appropriate (Taylor 2002: 101), the argument is that this developmental appropriate approach also has flaws. The researcher is aligned with the point of view that preschool programmes, for the economically disadvantaged learners who are the subjects in this research, must include effective academic instruction as well as learner development experiences. Delaying academic instruction for them will only widen the gap and increase their inadequacies, (Neuman 2006: 28-31), not only in vocabulary but also in the organisation of sentence structure. The problem is exacerbated by multilingualism (Páez, Tabors & López 2007:86-87), a problem that is prevalent at the research schools located in disadvantaged environments. Content that will narrow the performance

gap is therefore needed given the importance of improving reading and writing at poor South African schools.

An opposing view states that curricular with high teacher-directed instruction, with specific content and an emphasis on a highly child-initiated and teacher-responsive approach produced more positive short- and long-term educational outputs than those that did not (Connor et al 2006:666). The position neither totally endorses Piaget's developmental theory nor encourages Vygotsky's socio-cultural approach alone. It is an integrated approach that merges both theories and can accommodate a diverse school population such as the one in this country to produce good results.

Other strategies include reading aloud and pointing to letters to promote phonological awareness and alphabet knowledge. Access to books and frequent, shared book reading experiences are essential for early language and literacy development and exposing children to books at an early age enhances the skills. Previously teaching preschool children sound structures and words was considered developmentally incorrect but currently the two skills are recommended for preschoolers and are receiving increasing attention (Hawken, et al 2005:233).

2.3 Assessing emergent literacy

In addition to content on the teaching of emergent literacy, information on how teachers can check whether the approach they have selected yields the expected results is given in various assessment forms. For learners to attain skills in print recognition and word meanings, regular assessment is needed to inform teachers about the success of their instruction (Center 2005: 221).

Assessment of Grade R learners can be done in four different ways: by testing; by interviewing caregivers or parents; through the use of portfolios; or through observing learners. Of the four methods, tests are the least recommended because of the flaws associated with them for both teachers and for learners (Davin & van Staden 2005: 225). Experience with the testing of preschool children has shown that a major obstacle is the lack of standardised tests for different population groups and the lack of a suitable environment where the test can be administered. In the same vein, the feasibility of conducting interviews with parents is low, given the fact that many learners' parents are inaccessible either because of their employment conditions or their unawareness of the importance of being involved in their children's schoolwork within the South African context.

The use of portfolios as an assessment form that shows tangible learner progress is highly regarded. They contain example of learners' work in different learning areas that are analysed to decide whether the learner has made sufficient progress to move to the next level (Beaty & Pratt 2007: 10-12; Gunning 2005: 150). What seems to be of significance however, is whether there are clearly stated principles that must guide the preparation and use of portfolios and whether teachers have clear goals for this kind of assessment.

The most preferred assessment strategy for Grade R learners is observation (Gunning 2005: 146-147). Perhaps because there is no perimeter set thus allowing recognition of learners' individual differences which are so important at Grade R level. Through careful observation of

learner processes used to acquire oral, reading or writing skills the teacher can note whether the child is making good progress or whether there are challenges. For instance, a checklist can be drawn to indicate whether the child uses pictures to tell a story, or uses memory of repeated phrases, or memory of the entire story, and the extent to which this is done. It is important to note that the strategy in this form of assessment emphasises process over end-product and allows the teacher to see where learners are at so as to build on their knowledge through scaffolding. The comment made with regard to portfolios applies here as well. In addition, there is a need for an observation schedule that can serve as a guide to teachers and provide some form of organised system since observation can be a subjective process.

For teachers to be able to assess learners successfully, they need to differentiate between the concepts of assessment, which means a process of making decisions about learners' performance or development in a systematic way (Davin & van Staden 2005: 225) and evaluation which is seen to be more of a value making process (Gunning 2005: 150), lest they fall into the trap of using the concepts interchangeably and not knowing what they are looking for in learners' literacy performances.

On this note, it may be correct to classify the Curriculum Standards discussed by Beaty & Pratt (2007: 10-12) as evaluation, since the standards refer to benchmarks that determine where the learner must be at a given developmental stage or time in a curriculum structure. The advantage of standards is that they provide a uniform way of determining learner performance that can be used by teachers, administrators and policy makers. The researcher maintains however, that standards ignore the uniqueness of individual learners and if teachers are not well trained to use them, they may create mistakes to the disadvantage of learners.

Having acquired the background information about emergent literacy- what is involved in, how to teach it and how to assess it, the researcher was prepared for the task of scrutinising the relevance of the listed policy and Teacher's Guide documents to Grade R. The decision about whether the documents address the requirements for the development of emergent literacy will be well substantiated together with the question whether Grade R teachers are sufficiently guided to teach emergent literacy.

3. Research methodology

The researcher adopted a qualitative research approach and reviewed available language documents and other related sources written by the DoE to assist teachers in the Foundation Phase for planning and teaching pre literacy skills in Grade R. The aim of this research was to analyse policy and Teacher Guide documents for languages in order to determine whether these documents address the requirements for emergent literacy. The analysis focused on the discussion of the four concepts associated with emergent literacy, book knowledge, phonological awareness including oral skills and vocabulary, alphabet development and print awareness. The documents were also inspected to verify if there was any recommendation on teaching approaches and assessment strategies. On the basis of this information, a stand was taken on whether the documents provided guidance to Grade R teachers to teach pre literacy skills.

4. Findings

Of the 12 documents reviewed, three dealt with Grade R content and of the three, only one, the *Grade R Practical Ideas* (Department of Education (e) 2008); contained some detail about the requirements of emergent literacy. However, the content was very brief and referred to emergent literacy in a cursory manner. The document focused on outdoor teaching and learning, which overshadowed the significance of the aforesaid four concepts that this research considers key to emergent literacy. The content of the teacher guides, for instance, the *National Curriculum Statement – Teacher’s Guide for the Development of Learning Programmes: Foundation Phase* (Department of Education 2003), focused on how to prepare learning programmes, schedules and lesson plans for Grade 1 upwards and nothing was written for the Grade R teacher.

The two policy documents for ECD, namely the *Interim Policy for ECD* (Department of Education 1996) and *White Paper 5* (Department of Education 2002) set the scene for early learning by design and as policy documents should do. The concern however is that they lack the thread that provincial departments needed in order to articulate the curriculum stance taken hence the many gaps. In the *ECD Interim Policy* (Department of Education 1996: 18-19) for instance, the curriculum is very broadly stated and includes all the Learning Areas. The content does not make specific reference to Numeracy, Life skills or Literacy, with the result that the Provincial departments lacked the clarity on how to separate emergent literacy from the formal Literacy content of the grade 1 class.

Similarly the *Grade R policy, White Paper 5* (Department of Education 2002: 45) states among other broad statements, that practitioners and teachers must make use of developmentally appropriate practice without substantiating what it implies. As a result, the provincial departments concentrated on the curriculum content and not on *how* to teach it thus overlooking the significance of using the informal teaching approach for Grade R. The emphasis of both these policies was on access to early learning (29-43) and not on the business of teaching emergent literacy.

The two assessment documents, that is, the *ECD Interim Policy* and the *Grade R policy, White Paper 5* contained guidelines on assessment strategies for grades R to 9. However, upon close scrutiny, none of the assessment strategies included the strategies suitable for Grade R that were discussed in literature. It is evident that the unique learning style of Grade R children was overlooked in the same way that their need for acquiring emergent literacy was ignored. The assessment strategies for grade 1 were simplified and passed down to Grade R in the same way as the content of grade 1 was watered down to accommodate Grade R learners.

5. Conclusion

The fact that virtually no content on the requirements of emergent literacy is available in teacher guidance documents, and that even the only relevant document paid no particular attention to the critical four concepts discussed under the literature review, suggests that there is no guidance for Grade R teachers on promoting emergent literacy. This finding raises the need to conduct empirical research that will investigate whether any form of additional assistance is given to Grade R teachers at school based centres to develop learners’ pre literacy skills and fill in the gap.

While the move to provide Grade R at schools was deemed the best option given the already existing school structures and administration systems, the shortcomings that are noted in this investigation, especially the formal approach, must not be allowed to negate the benefits of this option. The DoE must recognize that by virtue of their nature, Grade R learners are different and are in an emerging state of learning. Further research is needed, moreover, to establish whether teacher guidance on numeracy addresses the pre-numeracy skills of these learners.

6. Recommendations

The following guidelines for appropriate Grade R content are recommended in view of what was noted in the analysis of the above documents.

- A Teacher's Guide for Grade R emergent literacy should be produced that is based on the theoretical standpoint of the ECD policy document namely, the Balanced Approach. The content should explicitly show what "balanced" means by incorporating some of Piaget's developmental approach and Vygotsky's social perspective and applying them to the acquisition of pre-literacy.
- The key concepts of phonology, word recognition, print awareness and knowledge of the alphabet should be included as content and elaborated on in terms of listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. Compilers of the guides must take cognizance of the fact that Grade R learners' mode of thinking and learning differs from that of learners in Grade 1 and higher grades and should incorporate content within the experiential level of the learner that can encourage a lot of language interactions. However the informal approach should still be the answer to this.
- The documents should contain various approaches to the teaching of emergent literacy with guiding principles so that different school populations can select the approaches best suited to the nature and context of their learners and the environment they are in.
- The Observation strategy of assessment is recommended since it will accommodate the wide range of learners that are found in multicultural and multilingual environments. While Curriculum Standards or milestones are used as benchmarks and regarded as suitable for establishing uniformity across schools, they may be exclusionary in the sense that it is not easy to locate a learner within a stipulated category. Standards should be used as guidelines and not as a form of assessment
- As a supportive measure the language of the documents should be simplified to make them understandable to teachers whose language is not the same as that of the document.

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