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Practitioners' Experiences of School Readiness in Rural Early Childhood Centres in QwaQwa Free State, South Africa

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Abstract

The analysis of the school preparation experiences of rural early childhood practitioners. Multiple complex issues exist regarding school preparedness in South Africa. Research has found that many South African children are unprepared for formal schooling. Some of the challenges experienced by these young learners were low reading strength, learning setbacks and complications, and sluggish general development. As a result of these issues, young children face long-term repercussions. These include the inability to escape the cycle of poverty, lack of educational support, and poor socioeconomic conditions within their environment. Therefore, it can be argued that teaching within the South African public schooling context is marred with difficulties and unforeseen challenges. It is difficult to imagine how to modify South African infrastructure so all children can reach their full potential.

Given that our ancient past is still rife with historical and power changes, the government must consider several factors while developing ways to aid transformation. This study investigated the perspectives of practitioners on school preparedness. At the same time, it investigates the significant learning at the grass-roots level that emerged from participation in a critical paradigm-based participatory action research project. The study is anchored in a philosophical methodology that leverages Practitioners' idea that early childhood learners are ready for formal school. They do not emphasize play as a pedagogy for learning in preparation for school readiness. This paper is grounded in constructivism, which helps comprehend how school readiness knowledge improves formal education for young students. The author used the qualitative research approach with an interpretive paradigm to explore practitioners' school readiness experiences. The author developed a semi-structured interview schedule to collect data from six practitioners in the Thabo-Mofutsanyana district in the Free State Province. The findings revealed practitioners lacked appropriate training and support in preparing young learners in ECD centres. Furthermore, practitioners lacked appropriate pedagogical skills to strengthen teaching and learning. The study recommended that practitioners receive ongoing professional teacher development in school readiness and use various teaching and learning strategies such as play pedagogy.

Keywords: practitioners, experiences, school readiness, early childhood centres

1. Introduction

Detailed mental, physical-motor, and effective-social development stages are necessary for a student to be school-ready (De Witt & Booysen, 2007; Woolmington, 2017). Young students must be prepared to learn in a formal school situation, which necessitates a well-developed body and Mind to meet the difficulties of schooling. Practitioners at early childhood centres are responsible for exposing children to activities that foster the development of essential skills for optimal learning, ensuring that children are school-ready. Learners construct knowledge through play and get opportunities to influence what occurs and understand (Dau, 1999; Levin, 1996; Pramling, 2005; Carlsson, 2008); while learners play with associates, it permits them to exert

personality and improve what they already know, take turns, collaborate, socialise with others, and use objects in a way that is expressive and exciting to them. Wood (2009) views practitioners as co-constructors who must display their comprehensive knowledge of school readiness when opportunities emerge; Play must be spontaneous, multidimensional, and complicated. As a co-constructor of learning, a practitioner must increase "teachable moments" and structure play prospects so that knowledge and teaching may arise. Practitioners in ECD Early Childhood Development (ECD) appear to conflate school preparedness and formal schooling, as they spend most of their time teaching these children to read and write.

Consequently, the play does not contribute much to the readiness (Mellei, 2012; Wood, 2013). As a result, it seems educators have difficulties when implementing school readiness in the classroom. They believe school preparedness teaches young children how to read and write, and consequently, there is some confusion as to what 'practitioners' are thinking about school readiness in the early years.

Numerous studies on school readiness in early childhood have been conducted (Grady, 2016; Mannik & Smith, 2019). Readiness depends on the child's physical, academic, social, and emotional capabilities (Dockett & Perry, 2002; Hanniffy, 2017). That is, school preparedness is a necessary skill that must be developed. Practitioners focus on acquiring intellectual, emotional, and social skills to prepare learners for formal schooling, while caregivers are responsible for meeting the learners' everyday needs (Tomlinson, 2013). Low levels of schooling deprivation in South Africa limit the capacity of families and caregivers to offer the necessary assistance and setting for school preparation (Seleti & Dawes, 2013). While the primary research has contributed to school readiness, none has centered on practitioners' school preparedness experiences in rural early childhood centers.

Early Childhood Education is a crucial element of ECD. ECE centres provide learners with a semi-structured learning environment in which they acquire various academic, social, and life-related skills to prepare them for formal education. ECE has been an integral component of ECD programs in low-income communities and nations, with backing from development agencies and monetary authorities. It has been recognised that investing in ECE is the most promising and cost-effective development endeavour. It has been discovered that programs in underprivileged communities produce lasting improvements in the quality of human resources (Barnett & Boocock, 1998). In his longitudinal research of a nationally representative sample of 1998-9 kindergarten students in the United States, Coley (2002) found that early stimulation at home and in the preschool program is connected to improved reading competence and mathematics skills, regardless of socio-economic status or race. Early stimulation is congruent with the findings of other studies, such as Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, and Klebanov (1994) and Essa (1996), who determined that socio-economic status is a confounding factor in school-related outcomes. Poverty and socio-economic status have been demonstrated to be significant predictors of lower intellect scores and problem behaviour in teenagers in the United States, particularly when combined with poor neighborhoods and troubled families. Although we cannot generalise poverty across states and nations, it invariably accompanies an ecology of uncertainty, frequent parental absences, learner-problem behaviours, powerlessness, and starvation, all of which are detrimental to sound and constructive learning (Jensen, 2009). To counteract the adverse effects of poverty or deprivation, ECE programs in low-income or resource-poor regions provide learners with a more caring, protective, and stimulating environment as soon as possible. An evaluation of investments in high-quality ECE reveals encouraging outcomes.

2. Literature Review

Readiness to learn indicates that the child is prepared for age-appropriate experiences, tasks, and skills. For example, a three-year-old is trained to understand in a group, and a five-year-old is designed to distinguish between truth and imagination. School preparedness begins with the willingness to learn, which happens before birth when the infant is "ready" to breathe and suckle. Being school-ready is a goal that requires preparation, much like a December beach vacation — you work towards it and periodically check that you are on the correct path (achieving milestones) and that progress has been completed. Learning readiness is a constant trait, although school preparedness is not. A specific age is related to school readiness. Refers to a child's ability to transfer and integrate well into the school environment and its routines and expectations (Thompson, 2020). Children must possess various social, language, play, physical, and self-care skills. School readiness is crucial because it enables teachers to grow and improve a child's skills in critical areas. As a result, the child must demonstrate specific skills to the next level. These skills include the cognitive ability to show curiosity and interest in learning new things and the social and emotional ability to engage in play. The Department of Basic Education believes mental and general development deficiencies before education can sometimes have long-lasting consequences for children, families, and society.

They emphasise that the most effective intervention time is before birth and throughout the first few years of a child's life. Therefore, they suggest investing in ECD should be a significant priority of the National Development Plan for 2030. (National Planning Commission, 2011). Numerous indicators demonstrate that early childhood education substantially impacts later schooling and education. Snow (2006) contends that exposure to

a broad vocabulary at home strongly predicts early language and literacy development and that these activities are prevalent in middle-class homes and schools. Research undertaken by Spaull and Hoadley in 2017 found that rural South African children continue to have little exposure to books at home and in school (Spaull & Hoadley, 2017), which hampers their capacity to acquire language early in their school careers. Siraj-Blatchford (2009) argues that South African rural communities residing in the former homeland continue to be among the world's most impoverished, lacking access to employment, education, land, housing, and health services. It can prevent communities and individuals from reaching their full potential. Children deserve better pedagogical efforts (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009) to be supported in numerous areas of development in preschools. School readiness is required for children to grow and realise their full potential. Ebrahim, Seleti, and Dawes advocate for children ages 3-5 center-based programs that are supported and periodically checked for quality (2013). Although programs such as quality community playgroups, access to community toy and book libraries, story-telling and early reading programs can support early learning for children not in centres. And centre-based interventions suitable for older children are typically more effective at enhancing language and cognitive outcomes than home-based early stimulation interventions. Ebrahim et al. (2013) emphasise the need for high-quality early learning programs and a results-driven approach to policy and practice. The United Kingdom has experienced a rise in tension in recent years, which was most recently reflected in the government's (2011) policy framework documents. The fact that politicians, academics, educationalists, and parents have not agreed upon a precise definition of "school readiness" has contributed to the contentious environment around the phrase and its use (Graue, 2006; Snow, 2006; Maxwell & Clifford, 2004). School readiness or "readiness for school" can have different meanings depending on the context in which it is used; for example, the phrase is used differently in the documents Supporting Families in the Foundation Years (DfE, 2011) and the cited Field (2011), Allen (2011), and Tickell (2011) reports. This reflects a broader trends, where the term has been used more frequently and for various reasons. Parents use the time to express their children's readiness for school. Still, educators and educational advisory organisations are increasingly using it to define what it means for young children to be ready for any form of care or education environment. This terminology ambiguity reflects that different policy, academic, and educational advisory bodies in England have varied perceptions of what it means for a kid to be "school ready," resulting in escalating conflicts.

Young children's transition from early learning environments to formal schooling is called school readiness. One of the most critical and influential transitions is being prepared for formal education, which influences enrollment, attendance, and completion of the process (Mohamed, 2013). In South Africa, low levels of education and economic and environmental disadvantage hinder the ability of families and caregivers to offer the necessary support and environment for children to be school-ready (Abrahim, Seleti & Dawes, 2013). School preparedness in preschool educators and parents for the child's physical, mental, social, and emotional abilities is tied to their preparedness. Formal schooling necessitates that young children are prepared to learn in a formal schooling environment, which implies that they will have a significantly developed body and mind to meet the difficulties of formal schooling. When young children are school-ready, they are interested in writing and reading content while older people are engaged with them. Parents and practitioners should be aware of specific characteristics that contribute to school preparation, such as emergent reading, which involves reading with visuals so that the child can comprehend the information associated with them. The child is currently in the scribbling period and enjoys drawing. Parents should read to their children and spend time with them to help them comprehend what they are capable of and what obstacles they face. To train children, parents and professionals should establish routines for them, such as times to sleep, eat, and clean up after playing with toys. These skills will enhance the child's knowledge of the time they enter formal education. Practitioners and parents must acknowledge that youngsters are interested. Therefore, they should not become bored when youngsters ask too many questions but provide sincere responses, as kids do not forget easily and are still learning. Play is vital at this age, and practitioners should encourage skill-building play among youngsters. They are even attending pre-primary education and enhanced student performance at age 15. Early childhood is a period of rapid growth, and a child's experiences between birth and age five substantially impact their future life prospects. In and of itself, a secure, joyful, and risk-free childhood is crucial. Good parenting and high-quality early and preschool education give children the foundation to maximise their abilities and talents as they grow.

3. Theoretical Framework

According to Vygotsky's (1978) constructivism theory, cognitive development results through guided learning within the zone of proximal development as learners and their partners co-construct knowledge. I chose this theory because the entire job of practitioners is to foster a problem-solving environment in which students are active participants in their learning. This notion is applicable in this context when the practitioner functions as a learning facilitator rather than an educator. The theory of Vygotsky's social development underpinned this study. It was developed in 1978 and focuses on the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The core idea of the ZPD is that a more knowledgeable person can enhance a learner's learning by guiding them through a task slightly

above their ability level. As the learners become more competent, the educators gradually stop helping until they can perform the skill themselves. After this, learners' initiative is crucial. It is against the, Vygotsky (1978) asserts the role of educators in supporting learners' development and academic skills through the integration of play pedagogies. Educators need to apply ZPD when using play pedagogies within the classroom context.

Different scholars are explicit that ZPD and play-based learning increase participation between learners and educators. Educators play other functions in various stages of the developmental trajectory of play to enhance the involvement between peers and the educator. The role of educators in implementing play pedagogies within ZPD approach is to increase participation in the classroom. As a result, this confirms that the relationship between ZPD and play pedagogies enhances the involvement. In this sense, Vygotsky argues that "play is the leading source of development in preschool years" as learners are encouraged to advance their learning and developmental abilities while participating in spontaneous yet enjoyable activities (Vygotsky, 1978; Ryu, 2003; Bodrova & Leong, 2015, p. 376; Taylor & Boyer, 2020). However, practitioners noted that Vygotsky limited his view on play to dramatic and make-believe play as he believed learners were able to develop their cognitive, social, and emotional domains, respectively, within these types of Play (Granic, Lobel, & Engels, 2014).

4. Research Design and Methodology

This study is lensed with an interpretive paradigm. Interpretivism in research permits practitioners to interpret their understanding of school preparedness. The design of the study is qualitative. This paradigm was excellent for this study since it emphasised the participants' perspectives to determine what influenced their beliefs and practices in the ECCE context (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2020).

Moreover, a qualitative research technique was deemed most appropriate for this study (Creswell, 2014) since it addressed the beliefs and perspectives of ECCE practitioners regarding the role of play in children's learning. In addition, a strategy based on illustrative case studies was adopted, commonly connected with qualitative research, particularly in the context of education (Merriam, 1998). By adopting this methodology, I aimed to gain a deeper and richer understanding of a group of participants (ECCE practitioners) within their respective contexts, specifically, the ECCE setting, to comprehend how their beliefs about play influenced the practices they chose to implement if implemented at all (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Rashid et al., 2019; Tomaszewski, Zarestky & Gonzales, 2020). To comprehend how ECCE practitioners interpret children's play as learning, it is necessary to examine their views in context (Walton, 2021). The research scenario includes both privileged and poor Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) settings in Gauteng Province (South Africa) to gain a more nuanced understanding of practitioners' attitudes about the significance of Play (Britto, Yoshikawa, & Boller, 2011). There were eleven ECCE centres in total, five (5) of which were privileged and six (6) of which were disadvantaged. Given the present conditions surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, it was suggested that data gathering for this project should go online. On the one hand, it would have been wonderful to observe ECCE practitioners in their distinct physical environments and study how they educate children for school preparation.

Validity, trustworthiness, and reliability are continuing concepts; hence, research can't be wholly valid or trustworthy; instead, researchers should concentrate on strengthening the validity and trustworthiness of their study (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014).

5. Selection of Participants

Purposive sampling was used to select research participants who would suit the purpose of the research (Mukherji & Abon, 2011). The participants were the early rural area practitioners from QwaQwa, Free State Province, South Africa. We had to select six practitioners knowledgeable about views and beliefs on play pedagogies in rural areas. Participants will be able to give out the necessary information about play pedagogies in rural areas. Moreover, participants were also informed that they could withdraw from participating should they, at any point, feel uncomfortable or unwilling to participate any further. In addition, pseudonyms were used to protect the participants' identities. Trustworthiness was addressed in terms of credibility dependability, that is, the direct quotations from the participants, confirmability that the participants knew the nature of the study and were aware of the issues of ethics and transferability. Sufficient details were provided. Trustworthiness was addressed in terms of credibility and dependability, that is, the direct quotations from the participants, confirmability that the participants knew the nature of the study and were aware of the issues of ethics, and transferability. Sufficient details were provided.

6. Data Collection

The information was gathered via semi-structured interviews. I employed a case study as my methodology. In my data analysis, I followed Creswell (2013). I organised the material for interview analysis and transcription. Reading or examining the data: This stage aims to obtain a general understanding of the material and the chance to think about its overall significance, such as coding procedure and generating a description of the people, place, or categories to be analysed. I was interpreting the results or findings. When collecting data, I sought

authorisation from the Department of Basic Education and used the University of Free State's ethical approval as a prerequisite. I highlighted the protection of their privacy, anonymity, secrecy, and rights. To guarantee the validity, I ensured that participants and I shared a common understanding of the obtained data and the extent to which I interpreted the data and concepts (Marshal & Rossman, 2018). The trustworthiness of a study is regarded as its credibility. Therefore, the findings are the most important criteria (Polit & Beck, 2014) for establishing the paper's credibility and reliability. I recorded the information gathered during participant interviews to confirm the data's integrity.

7. Themes

Challenges of practitioners in implementing school readiness in the classroom.

Practitioners' understandings of school readiness.

8. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis is a technique for methodically detecting, organising, and providing insight into meaning patterns (themes) across a dataset. By concentrating on meaning across a dataset, thematic analysis enables the researcher to comprehend collective or shared meanings and experiences. The purpose of theme analysis is not to identify unique and idiosyncratic meanings and experiences located solely inside a particular data item. Therefore, this strategy detects and makes sense of commonalities in how a topic is discussed or written about.

However, commonplace things are not necessarily significant. The meaning patterns that theme analysis enables the researcher to find must be relevant to the topic and research question being investigated. The analysis produces the answer to a question, even if, as in particular qualitative research, it is only via the analysis that the precise question being answered becomes evident. The thematic analysis could detect any dataset; the objective is to identify those pertinent to answering a research question. In examining white-collar workers' perceptions of sociality at work, a researcher may interview individuals about their work environment and begin by asking about a typical workday. If most respondents reported starting work at 9 a.m., there would be a trend in the data, but it would not necessarily be meaningful or significant. However, if many respondents indicated they planned to arrive at work earlier than necessary to speak with co-workers, this could mean an important pattern. Thematic analysis is a versatile technique that permits the researcher to focus on the data in various ways. With thematic analysis, you can properly analyse the meaning of the entire dataset or explore a specific phenomenon component in depth. You can describe the apparent or semantic interpretations of the data, or you can investigate the latent meanings, underlying assumptions, and concepts that lay beneath what is explicitly stated (see Braun & Clarke, 2006). The versatility of theme analysis makes it applicable to various research problems and study topics.

The two primary advantages of thematic analysis are its accessibility and adaptability. For those unfamiliar with qualitative research, theme analysis introduces a method that could otherwise appear unclear, mystifying, intellectually challenging, and excessively complex. It provides an entry point into qualitative research by teaching the mechanics of coding and carefully analysing qualitative data, which can subsequently be related to more significant theoretical or conceptual concerns. In the majority of qualitative research, the reverse is true.

In response to the second research question, the literature indicates that there is a growing body of evidence demonstrating that investing in children as early as possible has numerous benefits, including improving their health and happiness, laying the foundation for future academic success, increasing the fairness of educational opportunities, mitigating the effects of poverty, and fostering intergenerational mobility. In nations where officials have worked to improve the quality of pre-primary education, enrollment in such programs has been linked strongly with age-appropriate reading skills. This was one of the conclusions of the 2009 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), a project of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) that evaluated the education of students in 71 nations. Moreover, school systems that provide pre-primary education to a more significant proportion of the child population for a more extended period of time, with smaller student-to-teacher ratios, and that invest more per child at this level of education have the strongest correlation between pre-primary attendance and better student performance at age 15. In other words, the quality of pre-primary education directly influences the relationship between school attendance and achievement 15 years later.

9. Findings

In this section, I offer the results in response to question number one. What are the obstacles practitioners face when adopting school readiness in the classroom?

Theme 1: Importance of Play for learning in rural early childhood centres.

The importance of play, so far as learning is concerned, came to the fore during the semi-structured interviews. Practitioners in early childhood centres expressed the following on the importance of Play:

P1: "*Play is essential to children because they learn how to communicate with one another, and as they play, they share the toys and negotiate what to play and how to play*."

P2: "*children like to play; they play throughout the day*."

P3: "*I teach through play because children learn more quickly; when they play, they know something essential, especially during fantasy play*." It can be deduced that the practitioners have some appreciation of the importance of play and how it enhances young children's learning. Again, practitioners attempted to incorporate play in their teaching, as they mentioned fantasy play.

P4: *Play is essential children must play as to exercise their motor muscles, I let them to play indoors and outdoors I only watch them so that they may not get hurt or fight each other when they play*.

P5: "I teach through play; children like to play and I allow them to play trough out the day."

P6: *I do teach through play because children learn more quickly when they play as a result, they learn through play and they enjoy so much when they play and I play with them during fantasy play, I listen to them when they play then I join them even though they 'don't become free if the practitioner is too much involved in their play.*

From the participants' narratives, it is clear that practitioners have different viewpoints on the importance of play for learning. Practitioners have some appreciation of the importance of play and how it enhances the teaching of the young child.

The remaining conflict is that practitioners do not understand how to teach using play pedagogies. As a result, the Department's lack of training remains a factor.

Theme 2: Professional development and training.

P1 explained that the training she attended was "*for two weeks, and the Department of Health offered it. In that training, I was taught how to make my learning aids and follow the program to teach*."

P2: Her training was insufficient as she was "given training for three weeks by the Department of Health." *The training was on Introductory Pre-introductory programme.* P2 explained that she was taught basic teaching skills, such as planning for play inside and outside the classroom and making resources for teaching and learning.

On the other hand, P3 believes that her training to teach in ECD gives her a qualification that will help her to "further out my training by moving from level 1-4, which will take me the whole year to be trained, but it will be part-time."

An interview with Participant 2 revealed that the training she received was inadequate, as the Department of Health only provided three weeks of instruction (Mofokeng, 2018). The findings indicate that practitioners are untrained. Therefore, credentials from the Department of Basic Education and collaboration with the Department of Health must be implemented so that practitioners can access the skills, apply their knowledge in class, and properly grasp school readiness in early childhood. The second topic I examine is the practitioners' perception of school preparation and the research found that practitioners view school preparedness as formal schooling. According to Participant 3 in an interview, students lack discipline. They are too young to recall everything, but they must at least be able to read and write their names if they can concentrate. (Needham & Ukuer, 2020; Hidalgo, 2022) Practitioners stress the capacity of students to write their names, recognise numbers and letters, and count. Practitioners lack knowledge of school readiness and must be able to aid learners' growth toward school readiness. Practitioners must also be able to respond to learners' varied developmental levels by providing environments that capitalise on the abilities young children already possess (p. 106). Children who are "really ready for school" are independent, self-motivated, and intellectually curious, which may contrast with the universal, predetermined measurements of success demanded by a curricular outcomes-based approach (p. 106).

10. Discussion

School readiness refers to a 'child's ability to transfer and integrate well into the school environment and its routines and expectations' (Thompson, 2020). Children must possess various social, language, play, physical, and self-care skills. As a result, the child must demonstrate specific skills to the next level. One commonly used practice in early childhood is 'learning through play.' Play-based learning is described as a context for learning through which children organise and make sense of their social worlds as they actively engage with people, objects, and 'representations' (EYLF, 2009:46). Children love to play and play often mirrors what is essential in their lives. There are many different types of play, and these can be either process orientated-play is a means unto itself, and players may not have an end or goal in sight of self-motivating play, which is considered its reward to the player (Shipley, 2008; Mofokeng, 2018).

11. Conclusion

South African context, "there is a wide recognition that professionalisation, continuing professional development

and career paths, post-provisioning, adequate conditions of service, and a conducive working environment, are critical elements of an effective national early childhood development human resources strategy" (Department of Social Development, 2015: 92). Training provisioning for the ECD workforce includes technical and vocational colleges, non-profit organisations and more recently, higher education institutions. How practitioners understand play as a pedagogy for school readiness is complex and contextual issue. The absence of practitioner training in using play as a learning methodology for school readiness is critical. According to the research, the lack of practitioner training is a significant obstacle. Hidalgo (2022) practitioners are unqualified staff members pursuing practitioner qualifications at levels two and three. This article demonstrated that guidance in South Africa concerning school readiness children's learning through play is restricted. Factors that influence the efficacy of play as a pedagogy for learning are: 'practitioners' lack of professional training, quality of early learning environments, availability of competent programmes, and acknowledgment of learning through play as a pedagogy for school readiness in early childhood education. Current experiences of play, playful environments, competent practitioners, demands set for teaching, and quality of children's engagement in play.

12. Recommendations

The Department of Basic Education must make it compulsory for all practitioners in South Africa to get the necessary training and qualifications in collaboration with the Department of Social Health. The findings revealed that practitioners do not understand what a pedagogy of play is, nor do they know the different play-based programmes that can be put into place to enhance learning through play. There needs to be quality teacher education and in-service programmes that focus on the following:

Defining play and play as a pedagogy allows practitioners to understand school readiness and formal school clearly.

We are developing play-based programmes like school readiness to support children's learning through play.

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