



Briefing Paper 343

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## Grade R Education: Getting the Basics Right

*Policies that seek to remedy deficits incurred in early years are much more costly than early investments wisely made, and do not restore lost capacities even when large costs are incurred. The later in life we attempt to repair early deficits, the costlier the remediation becomes*

*James J Heckman*

### 1. Introduction

Last year, 2013, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) released for comment a draft policy document that seems to concretise a commitment Minister Angie Motshekga made in her 2010 budget vote speech. She promised then that by 2014 “there will be universal access to Grade R for all age appropriate children”. The draft Policy Framework for Universal Access to Quality Grade R Education (hereafter referred to as the Draft Policy) also appears to respond to the National Development Plan’s (NDP) vision that quality education be expanded to pre-schoolers so as to improve overall academic performance, language proficiency, high school completion rates, etc. Because learning is a stratified process, i.e. the mastery of one skill is required before a subsequent skill can be required, investing in pre-school education will ensure that rewards are reaped later.

What stands out in the NDP’s vision is not simply the expansion of access to pre-school education, but the provision of *quality* pre-school education. It is therefore encouraging that the Draft Policy focuses largely on the *quality* aspect of reception year (Grade R) education. As Ursula Hoadley puts it: “Quality at this level of schooling refers specifically to fostering positive social and cognitive learning in an environment that is safe, nurturing and stimulating, thus laying the basis for future learning and enhanced life chances”.<sup>1</sup>

Pre-school education’s importance is well documented. It is here that the child (very often

for the first time) is introduced to numbers, shapes and letters. It is also here that the child learns to socialize, to develop fine motor skills, and to concentrate; all essential skills that will aid in the learning process.

This paper will explore the key issue of access vs. quality and how well the draft policy responds to that tension. Some of the content of the briefing paper is gleaned from a roundtable discussion hosted by the CPLLO in February, at which the main speakers were Mr Nic Spaull, researcher on socio-economic policy at the University of Stellenbosch, and Dr Linda Biersteker, head of research at the Early Learning Resource Unit.

### 2. Current Policy Framework

There are two main documents that guide the implementation of Grade R: Education White Paper 5 (EWP5), tabled in 2001, and the National Norms and Standards for Grade R Funding (NSF-Grade R). Grade R is neatly sandwiched between early childhood development programmes (0 – 4 years old) and Grade 1 (which signals the start of the ‘formal’ school system). Since the tabling of EWP5, many efforts have been made to incorporate Grade R into the formal public school system, only to fail because the aim was ‘never informed by a common national vision’<sup>2</sup>. However, since the publication of the NDP, government has shown a greater urgency to tackle the challenge. Not only did it produce the Draft Policy document for comment, but the governing party has included in its election

manifesto that it will work towards ‘realising two years of compulsory pre-school education ...’<sup>3</sup>

### **3. Universal Access to Reception-Year Education**

One aspect of childhood development that South Africa has been able to get right is the steady improvement of access to Grade R education, which has increased measurably since 2002. Between 2001 and 2009, Grade R enrolment grew by as much 300% – from 242 000 to 768 000<sup>4</sup>. Even in the poorer provinces like Limpopo and the Eastern Cape, 5 year-olds are either in Grade R at schools or at ECD centres. In 2011 the Eastern Cape had an enrolment rate of more than 100%, while Limpopo had an enrolment rate of 87%<sup>5</sup>. Admittedly, despite these increases in enrolment rates over the last few years, in some places they still fall short of the target set out in EWP5: universal access to Grade R for all five-year-olds by 2010. However, this target has since been shifted to 2014 as per the targets set out in the DBE’s Action Plan 2014.

It is not surprising, then, that the Draft Policy document places less emphasis on universal access to Grade R than on the quality of the education that will be provided in that grade. Some of the major challenges to delivering quality education include: (1) a poorly developed curriculum; (2) poorly trained and paid teachers; (3) misdirected and inadequate funding.

#### **3.1. Curriculum development**

According to the 2002 Revised National Curriculum Statement R-9, and the 2010 Foundation Phase Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), the Grade R curriculum is part of the foundation phase curriculum. Despite this, however, the Draft Policy now proposes three policy options:

- (a) retain Grade R within the foundation phase curriculum, with all related policies;
- (b) include Grade R in the foundation phase catalogue with all related processes for the resourcing of foundation phase classes; or
- (c) include Grade R in all training of foundation phase teachers on the curriculum and related matters.

Together, all of these policy options would go some way to formalising Grade R, but the challenge in fully integrating Grade R is to encourage a mindset change. The fact that Grade R is sandwiched between ECD programmes (with

their focus on informal structures and learning through play) and Grade 1 (with its focus on the learning of formal curriculum content) presents a challenge to Grade R teachers and curriculum developers. Grade R curriculum development has suffered because the grade is often treated as a watered-down version of Grade 1, rather than being aligned with ECD pedagogical practices. Ursula Hoadley argues that “play is a necessary *pedagogy* at this level, which should not undermine the teaching of domain-specific *curriculum* contents. At the same time, a more formal, direct mode of instruction should not obscure the learning and developmental affordances for young children of learning through play”<sup>6</sup>.

It is not only a well designed Grade R curriculum that is essential, but also the support given to teachers. According to Nic Spaull, the provision of quality Grade R education needs, amongst other things:

- continued support for teachers to implement CAPS;
- increased in-service training with specific emphasis on providing teachers with practical strategies for supporting early learning; and
- evidence-based learning programmes designed for local context that respond better to teaching children from poorer areas.

A well designed curriculum should be very specific about *what* should be taught at this level and about *how* a teacher should teach the specific content.

#### **3.2. Teacher training**

A 2010 South African Institute of Distance Education (SAIDE) research report indicated that the Grade R sector is characterised by a large number of under-qualified teachers.<sup>7</sup> This worrying fact has prompted the DBE to propose a minimum initial qualification for Grade R teachers in its new Draft Policy<sup>8</sup>. In terms of the proposal, an initial Diploma in Grade R Practices would be required from all new entrants to the sector without any prior ECD qualifications. Two new access qualifications are proposed (before a candidate can enrol for the Diploma): the Higher Certificate in Grade R Practices and the Advanced Practices in Grade R.

While this proposal is welcomed, questions remain (as evidenced from the roundtable

discussion) as to where these qualifications should be offered. Are universities the best equipped? Should teacher training colleges be re-opened or should the Further Education and Training (FET) colleges be roped in? Deciding on the best institution will be a challenge, as any institutional arrangement will present its own difficulties. For example, the issue of re-opening teacher training colleges has been an item of discussion amongst politicians, academia, educationists and political commentators for a long time – with no answer in sight. FET colleges, on the other hand, are not considered the best in delivering quality tertiary education. The FET colleges' poor status has prompted the DBE to propose in the Draft Policy that FET colleges should collaborate with institutions of higher education to deliver the proposed Diploma. Further, the plight of FET colleges may change if one considers the proposals of the recently published White Paper for Post School Education and Training. This White Paper envisages a much enhanced role for FET colleges.

Another aspect that forms a crucial part of training for Grade R teachers (and the teaching profession in general) is whether consideration should be given to the pre-selection of candidates. The quality of Grade R education, as for any teaching, is intrinsically linked to the ability of the teacher to deliver meaningful education.

### ***3.3. Inadequate and misdirected funding***

The National Norms and Standards for Grade R Funding (NSF-Grade R) states that the total per learner cost for Grade R should be equal to 70% of the total per learner cost of Grade 1. Thus, for every R100 spent on a Grade 1 learner, R70 should be spent on a Grade R learner. However, this is seldom the case. The DBE has reported that in 2011/2012 the total cost per learner (in public schools) was R10 500. For a Grade R learner it was R 3 112<sup>9</sup> – well short of the 70% stipulated in the policy.

This under-funding of Grade R is further exacerbated by inter-provincial spending inequalities. For example, in 2011/2012 Gauteng province spent R7 823 on a Grade R learner, while Limpopo spent only R845. The differences in spending patterns may be due to the misdirection of funds – provincial education departments and schools may be guilty of cross-subsidization, with money earmarked for Grade R finding its way to other educational needs.

If the funding is inadequate it means that schools have less to spend on personnel and on learning and teaching support material (LTSM), and consequently quality suffers. As a result of the long-standing problem of under-funding of Grade R, the DBE has finally sought to address the problem through the Draft Policy. Acknowledging the fact that most provinces have failed fully to implement the NSF-Grade R, the DBE has proposed that a review must be conducted. This review should:

- (a) promote 'uniform implementation of 70% of Grade 1 learner cost in year 1;
- (b) 'increase per learner cost to that which is equal to Grade 1 learner cost in year 2; and
- (c) achieve 'fully inclusive Norms and Standards for funding schools, inclusive of Grade R, in year 3'.

Linked to the funding of Grade R is problem of Grade R teachers' remuneration; they are often very poorly paid. Anecdotal evidence suggests that average salaries range between R4 000 and R6 000, because no legislation governs the employment of Grade R teachers; and they are usually employed by school governing bodies, rather than by education departments. It is often argued that because of these low salaries schools find it challenging to attract appropriately qualified teachers, which in turn affects the quality of education on offer. It is suggested, therefore, that the best way to address this problem is for Grade R teachers to be employed by education departments, which can offer more competitive salaries and benefits. This solution, however, is not without its challenges. A large proportion of the education budget already goes towards salaries and any change in teacher numbers will have a huge effect on the budget. However, it can also be argued that the DBE cannot advocate for the standardisation of the qualification of Grade R teachers without giving serious consideration to the standardisation of Grade R teacher salaries.

## **4. Conclusion**

There is a plethora of studies attesting to the benefits of early learning, and it is encouraging that there are plans to build on the strides South Africa has made to get children into ECD centres and schools. The challenge now, as everyone has recognised, is to provide quality education. Quality education can only be delivered to five year olds if there is an investment in producing suitably qualified teachers, supported by

appropriate in-service training programmes; if there is an assurance that Grade R will be funded adequately; and if measuring tools are put in place to monitor the quality of the education that is necessary for successful Grade R education.

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<sup>1</sup> Ursula Hoadley (2013): *Building Strong Foundations: Improving the quality of early education*. South African Child Gauge, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> South African Institute of Distance Education (2010): *Grade R research project*.

<sup>3</sup> African National Congress (2014): *Election Manifesto 2014*.

<sup>4</sup> Statistics quoted at the CPLO roundtable on Grade R Education: getting the basics right.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*

<sup>6</sup> Ursula Hoadley, *op cit*.

<sup>7</sup> Ursula Hoadley, *op cit*.

<sup>8</sup> Department of Basic Education (2013): *Draft Policy Framework for Universal Access to Grade R*. Government Gazette No. 36752, 15 August 2013.

<sup>9</sup> Nic Spaull, information presented at the CPLO roundtable discussion.

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