

Chapter 6: Synthesis, Conclusions and Implications of the Study. Responses of Early Childhood Teachers to Curriculum Change

6.1 Introduction

In this concluding chapter, I present a synthesis of previous chapters, reflect on my research design and methodology, revisit my data, draw conclusions based on my findings, and suggest implications of my study for policy, practice and future research.

6.2 Main Findings

The Grade R teachers in my study produced a farrago of responses to curriculum change. Their responses were chaotic, random and inconsistent. Despite appearing to be adopting and adapting the curriculum change, they expressed reservations about what they were doing, in other words they reluctantly complied with the curriculum change. For example several participant teachers did not personally agree with the departmentally produced learning support material that consisted largely of worksheets. Despite this, they used the material on a daily basis. In addition, while some participants were critical of the new planning requirements and did not regard them as useful, they reluctantly complied because they knew that their planning files would be checked by their heads of departments and departmental officials.

The Grade R teachers in my study had one outstanding characteristic in common – they are passionate about their work. They described themselves as having a deep love for children, being committed to doing their best for their learners, and enjoying working with young children. My examination of the internal factors influencing Grade R teachers' responses to curriculum change revealed that their beliefs played a significant role in how they implemented the National Curriculum Statement (NCS). Overall, the teachers reported that the NCS had detracted from their enjoyment of their work. All the participants stated that they believed that the Grade R curriculum should be play-based, flexible and informal.

Paradoxically, their curriculum planning reflected a more formal, academic approach. They attributed this to the learning outcomes and assessment standards prescribed by the NCS. This was further compounded by the location of their Grade R classrooms at state primary

schools and the role of their heads of department who are Foundation Phase teachers. In particular, their HoDs are responsible for their curriculum planning and monitoring. The Grade R teachers perceived themselves to be under pressure to ensure that their learners are better prepared for Grade 1 and formal learning. During a classroom observation one of the participants repeatedly enquired of the children: “Are you listening? You need to know this in Grade 1.” This contrasted sharply with the views she expressed during interviews which revealed tensions between her theory and practice. As noted in Section 5.7.2.3, the Grade R teachers were unaware that their principals held similar views to their own on the implementation of the NCS in Grade R. The principals could have provided crucial support in convincing parents that the teachers should not introduce formal academic skills for which their children were not yet ready for. Instead, teachers gave in to this pressure because they felt overwhelmed by parents’ demands, despite the costs to their job satisfaction as discussed in section 5.7.3. In addition, principals were unanimous in the view that Grade R learners should “mainly play” and that learning should be enjoyable since it was their first experience of school and that the main purpose was to orient learners to the school environment. Two of the four principals had never visited the Grade R classes due to a lack of time, the third visited the class regularly and the four participated in classroom activities.

With one exception, the participants’ teaching experience ranged from 10 to 24 years and they regarded themselves as competent and knowledgeable. Their unhesitating responses to questions posed suggested a high level of self-confidence. No participant regarded herself as being unqualified. Participants were willing to divulge their qualifications and were able to list all the training programmes they had attended. Their actual lack of formal qualifications was pointed out by their principals. For example, at sites B and C the participants regard themselves as competent, even though the principal said that they are “unqualified”, and in fact they are unqualified in terms of the Norms and Standards for Educators (National Department of Education, 2000). Much of the international literature has grappled with questions related to the most appropriate preparation for ECE teachers (Ackerman 2006; Wallet 2006). There appears to be agreement that a four-year Bachelors degree with specialisation in ECE should be the minimum qualification (Lobman & Ryan 2007). Although qualifications do not equate to competence, a positive correlation has been found between professional development and effective classroom practice if accompanied by adequate support (Fullan 1993; Hargreaves 2005; Hirsh-Pasek *et al.* 2009; Walsh *et al.* 2006). Since teachers need to possess foundational, practical and

reflective competence, a strong focus on practical classroom application is essential. In South Africa the minimum qualifications for ECE teachers has also steadily been increasing. Surprisingly, the underqualified participants seemed to be more highly motivated than the qualified participants. This could be attributed to the fact that they previously had only poorer contexts as a form of comparison, while the qualified participants had always worked in well resourced contexts. In addition, underqualified teachers appeared to have a higher status in their communities than qualified teachers. This could be attributed to parents being unaware of their underqualified status.⁵⁷ Participants in the well resourced context were not without challenges. They reported that they are under more pressure from parents, particularly educated parents who are more inclined to prescribe to teachers and to question or even challenge teachers' assessment of their children's progress. The participants were also very aware of the fact that "we have a good reputation and we have to maintain it and continuously improve". Ironically, the underqualified teachers reported higher levels of appreciation and respect from parents. This could be attributed to parents being unaware of their underqualified status.

The first phase of my data collection involved the analysis of teachers' written lesson plans. In all cases the plans were largely compliant with the Department of Education's directives. I was therefore surprised when my classroom observations revealed that teachers' implementation of the NCS was largely superficial. The participants in my study *adopted* the departmental directives regarding lesson planning and assessment reports, but their instructional practice revealed very limited change. McLaughlin (1998) and Stoffels (2004) argue that in the face of curriculum change, teachers tend to *adopt* only the superficial features of the innovation, which my study confirms. Their main reason for doing so was their belief that the NCS is inappropriate for their learners.

This raises the question: Could the NCS be implemented in appropriate ways that would benefit their learners? According to the international literature it could, provided that teachers understand how to implement it effectively (Darragh, 2007; Goldstein, 2006).⁵⁸ These authors argue that the emphasis should be on developmentally appropriate outcomes, content and assessment. Furthermore, the international debate has shifted from questioning ECE standards to the way in which they are applied (Scott-Little *et al.*,

⁵⁷ This appears to be determined by teachers' qualifications in relation to that of parents. The qualified teachers noted that very highly educated parents did not regard them as sufficiently qualified even though they held the equivalent of bachelors degrees.

⁵⁸ See section 2.4.3.

2003), with the emphasis on the provision of professional development, resources and support (NAEYC, 2004).

These external factors are significant in influencing how the teachers in my study responded to curriculum change. I found that the teachers expected their principals to facilitate their access to ongoing professional development and resources.⁵⁹ Unexpectedly, they did not want pedagogical support from them. The Grade R teachers regarded themselves as the most knowledgeable persons when it comes to Grade R practice. They perceived their principals and HoDs as being ignorant about the Grade R area of expertise. As a result, they did not desire instructional leadership from either their principal or their HoD. Where instructional leadership was provided, it was the responsibility of the HoD. In these instances, the Grade R class strongly resembled the Grade 1 classes. Regardless of teachers' negative attitudes towards pedagogical support, the literature insists that teachers require a comprehensive system of support (Bascia & Hargreaves, 2000; Ryan & Ackerman, 2005) and effective school management (Jansen, 1999). Their *resistance* was more than "avoiding the challenge of change" (Richardson & Placier, 2001:905); they fundamentally disagreed with the way in which curriculum change was being implemented. The main issue therefore is certain aspects of Grade R teachers' classroom practice as gleaned through my repeated observations of their lesson presentations. Since I did not observe significant levels of implementation of their lesson plans, there may be a need to consider how instructional practice could (appropriately) reflect the official curriculum. Due to the lack of buy-in from teachers and the lack of enforcement of accountability, they appear to comply with the policy's directives, but in reality they are not implementing curriculum change. However, it should be noted that ECE teachers working in community-based centres historically were not accountable for learners' learning and development, largely due to the absence of national standards. This could also explain why the teachers in state primary schools were so reluctant to participate in communities of practice that would include their colleagues observing their teaching, and why they were so relieved that district officials do not have time to visit their classrooms.

Although Grade R teachers were enthusiastic to participate in professional development programmes, they appeared to be most strongly motivated by extrinsic factors, particularly higher salaries paid to qualified teachers. With the exception of the qualified teachers, they

⁵⁹ See Refer to section 6.4.3.

did not associate professional development programmes with improved classroom practice or learner performance. This is an area for concern since these issues constitute central considerations when introducing curriculum change.

In most cases, the Grade R teachers noted that they would pursue Foundation Phase posts because of the absence of a career path for Grade R teachers. Initially, the Grade R teachers were satisfied with their conditions of service and remuneration. However, over time their basis of comparison has shifted from their former community-based contexts to their Foundation Phase colleagues who earn much higher salaries, despite doing what was perceived to be the same work. A few of the Grade R teachers even pointed out that Grade R teachers work harder than their Foundation Phase counterparts. Their work is physically more demanding because they need to be more actively involved and constantly present with their learners. For example, they also pointed out that Grade R teachers “never relax” because they were required to be present during outdoor free play to supervise their learners and ensure their safety while their Foundation Phase colleagues drank tea in the staffroom. Implementing the official curriculum in Grade R was viewed by some of the participants (e.g. Anna) as a stepping stone into the Foundation Phase.

The Grade R teachers’ lack of professional recognition as teachers caused considerable insecurity and influenced their responses to curriculum change. Ensuring that their contracts would be renewed each year motivated them to implement the curriculum change. They perceived themselves as under pressure to accommodate the demands of departmental officials, their colleagues and parents. Frequent comments were made related to the high expectations of Grade R programmes and the importance of “keeping everyone happy”. Teachers also frequently mentioned not feeling appreciated by parents and openly acknowledged that they found it particularly stressful when parents challenging their assessment reports, especially if these were negative. The underqualified teachers said that they were intimidated by Foundation Phase colleagues, especially Grade 1 colleagues who regularly questioned what they taught their learners during their Grade R year. Several participants noted that their record keeping was far more detailed than required because they wanted to ensure that they protected themselves and had evidence of their assessment judgments readily available when parents or colleagues challenge it.

Teachers’ critical comments on the Grade R policy choice revealed their dissatisfaction with the lack of consultation with and buy-in from Grade R teachers themselves. They

experienced the curriculum change as top-down. Several teacher participants expressed the view that the NCS was not developmentally appropriate and that Grade R would be better suited to preschool than primary school environments. In this regard, as researcher I am compelled to acknowledge my bias since I agree with them and this view is consistent with the international literature. An isolated year-long programme cannot sufficiently address the needs of our South African schooling system; neither can it prepare learners for formal learning. But the expectations on the Grade R programme are compounded by/ undermined by the fact that 23% of five year olds enter Grade 1 with developmental delays, immediately begin learning in an additional language and are often taught by underqualified teachers in poorly / inadequately resourced classrooms.

6.3 Reflections on the Research Process

In South Africa, very limited research has been conducted on Grade R teachers' responses to curriculum change. My study attempted to fill this gap in the available research findings and focused on school-based Grade R teachers in different contexts in Gauteng Province. In particular, their contexts ranged from a no-fee school that is poorly resourced, to moderately resourced and well resourced institutions. All the research sites are government-run primary schools.

I undertook a qualitative study from the perspective of Grade R teachers in order to illuminate their responses to curriculum change. I was pleasantly surprised by their eagerness to participate in my study. The fact that I had previously been a Grade R teacher enabled me to establish rapport with the teachers. With each visit they were more comfortable and more prepared to share their experiences. I was often challenged to make sense of what initially appeared to be contradictory data. None of them had ever participated in a research study before, which suggests that the South African ECE field is under-researched. Some of the participants' responses were:

Reinnette: Our sector is so marginalised. It is exciting that you are doing research on what we do everyday.

Jane: No-one has ever asked me for my opinion. Policymakers should ask teachers what would work in their classrooms.

I was fortunate to have repeated engagements with all the participants. When I informed the principal of Site A, that the participants in my study were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, he responded, "but we want publicity, we want recognition. People are quick to

complain and slow to compliment.” I explained that the ethical considerations of my study prevented me from mentioning any participant or school’s name.

I spent the first year of my study immersed in the literature on how teachers in general and ECE teachers in particular, in various countries respond to curriculum change. This literature study led to the development of my conceptual framework which provided a lens to understand how the participants in my study responded to curriculum change in comparison to the literature findings.

Data collection involved an initial introductory meeting to explain my study, collecting data from semi-structured interviews, which were recorded and transcribed, and follow up informal discussions and telephonic conversations. The follow up methods involved member checking and seeking clarity to ensure that opinions were accurately captured. Thereafter, I conducted repeated classroom observations, as well as document analysis of teachers’ written lesson plans, teaching resources and assessment reports. In addition, I interviewed the principal of each of the four research sites and was privileged to be invited to have tea in the staff room of each research site on several occasions. This enhanced my understanding of the context of curriculum change.

My findings suggest that Grade R teachers’ responses to curriculum change were complex and farraginous. All the participants confirmed that they were implementing the curriculum change according to the requirements of the NCS. In contrast the data suggested that they were selectively compliant since there were aspects which they intentionally ignored and resisted. Some of the participants pointed out that they were reluctantly complying because they did not personally agree with the curriculum change. I therefore conclude that the participant teachers’ responses to curriculum change were consistent with the four main responses discussed in the literature, and on which I based my conceptual framework, namely *ignore*, *resist*, *adopt* and *adapt*. Each teacher in my study exhibited each of the responses, though some responses were more prominent than others. My analytical strategy presented in Table 5.1 enabled me to dissect different aspects of teachers’ responses according to the initial main themes and sub-themes of my study and to examine their similarities and differences more closely. In this final chapter I will revisit and reflect on the shortcomings of my conceptual framework in relation to the themes that later emerged during my data analysis.

One of the main weaknesses of my study is that I did not conduct in-depth interviews with the Heads of Departments (HoDs) of the four sites. In general, the teachers did not view them as being knowledgeable about Grade R, but I could not verify this unless the HoDs themselves were to mention it during informal discussions. Such discussions occurred only at Site A.

6.4 Implications of the study

Despite appearing to implement curriculum change, the teachers reported experiencing change in overtly negative ways. For example, it encroached on their leisure time. This is consistent with the findings of other studies on curriculum change such as those conducted by Falk (2000) and Harlen (2005). These studies found that teachers have become more test orientated than learning orientated as a result of increasing accountability demands. Since my findings suggest that Grade R teachers' main response to curriculum change was *reluctant compliance*, I will draw related conclusions and highlight the implications of my study for policy, practice and further research, according to my main research themes.

6.4.1 Implications for Teachers' Lesson Planning

Teachers' lesson plans were compliant with policy because they knew that they would be checked by their principals, HoDs or departmental district officials. Despite reflecting the main design features of the NCS, some lesson plans revealed gaps in teachers' conceptual understanding, for example limited integration of the eight learning areas into the three Foundation Phase learning programmes, and a lack of cohesion or articulation across the learning programmes.

The teachers reported that departmental directives pertaining to lesson planning were too labour intensive and detracted from their enjoyment of teaching.⁶⁰ Only the qualified teachers appeared to understand the importance of planning, collaborating with their colleagues, reflecting on their planning, and constantly reviewing their plans in order to improve their instructional practice (Pickard, Kremenitzer & Myler, 2006; Ethridge & King, 2005).

⁶⁰ As noted previously, this was addressed after my fieldwork through Circular 2/2010.

6.4.2 Implications for Lesson Presentations

It appears that relatively limited attention has been paid by policymakers to how teachers implement the official curriculum in their classrooms. Rowan and Miller's (2007:255) argument that "change frequently flounders at the classroom door" is particularly relevant to my study. The view expressed by one of the participants that "my classroom is my private space" is not only inappropriate, it is also a source for concern since it suggests that she was *resisting* being held accountable for implementing curriculum change. It appears that more attention should be devoted to teachers' instructional practice. The Grade R teachers in my study were forthright about the fact that due to the intensification of their workload, they mainly implemented only what would be checked. I therefore regard them as *reluctantly compliant* with curriculum change.

If the Department of Basic Education were to conduct more classroom visits, even random classroom visits, teachers may be more likely to accept accountability for implementing the official curriculum. This should be accompanied by building the capacity of departmental officials in relation to their instructional support role. Since the majority of the teachers believed that the curriculum should be play-based and informal, departmental officials should be knowledgeable of how teachers could apply this to the official curriculum. Teacher trade unions should be lobbied to convince their members of the importance of being held accountable for improving teaching and learning.

In the sections that follow, I discuss separately each of the external factors, namely professional development, resources and support, which constitute the main infrastructural requirements that influence how teachers respond to curriculum change.

6.4.3 Implications for Professional Development

The literature reviewed in Chapters 2 and 3 indicates that across the education spectrum, there is consensus that professional development is essential to enable teachers to implement curriculum change. Furthermore, a cogent argument is presented in Chapter 2 for the provision of training prior to the implementation of curriculum change.

In Gauteng Province, the Department of Education introduced professional development for Grade R teachers in 2003. However, as Grade R teachers have relocated from community-based ECE centres to state primary schools, training has not kept pace with curriculum implementation. Moreover, professional development programmes are often

fragmented and unrelated to Grade R teachers' instructional practice. Although the majority of participants in my study stated that professional development programmes were practically valuable, others stressed that departmental workshops emphasised policy without providing adequate classroom implementation strategies, with the result that they did not find the training practically useful.

According to some of the participants, Grade R teachers require further training on new learning areas such as technology and mathematics that were not part of their initial training. The Grade R teachers pointed out that in such cases there is a need for training to focus on isolated aspects of the curriculum. Given the historic marginalisation of the ECE field and the lack of accredited training programmes, the focus until now has been on qualifications rather than on skills programmes. Nevertheless, in addition to qualifications, Grade R teachers need specialised training. It also appears that those providing instructional leadership and support to Grade R teachers should understand the nature of their work and the fundamental pedagogical differences between Grade R and the rest of the Foundation Phase.

All Grade R teachers need to undergo training on the NCS, regardless of the qualifications they already hold. The debate as to whether professional development for Grade R teachers should focus on skills or qualifications may be misplaced. It is more importantly a question of recognising that both these aspects require attention, rather than one or the other. Professional development should be practically orientated and should strengthen and support Grade R teachers' instructional practice.

All the participants regarded Grade R programmes as being unique, distinct from, and fundamentally different to Grade 1 to 3 programmes, even though Grade R to Grade 3 teachers implement the same official curriculum, the NCS. How they implement it is where the real difference lies. Grade R teachers' teaching methodologies and teaching strategies vary from those of both pre-reception year teachers and foundation phase teachers. They vary because they are more structured than pre-reception year programmes but less rigid and formal than foundation phase programmes. My findings suggest that other teachers have a limited conceptual understanding of the uniqueness of Grade R as well as how young children learn and develop. Furthermore, Grade R teachers require specialised knowledge and skills to implement the NCS in developmentally appropriate ways. ECE teachers must be responsive to their learners' needs and context and be able to teach in a range of ECE settings and programmes. Reception year teaching programmes should

focus on developing teachers' understanding of emergent literacy and emergent numeracy. In addition, Grade R teachers must give life skills more attention, as this is essential to the holistic development of learners. This will ensure that learners are not simply prepared for formal schooling and academic learning but for life.

Initial teacher education programmes in South African institutions and organisations are not flexible enough to allow Grade R teachers multiple routes to acquire recognised qualifications. This appears to be a significant barrier to the career paths of Grade R teachers. Many South African higher education institutions only offer Foundation Phase initial teacher education programmes. Teachers therefore have a limited understanding of early learning and development, specifically that it begins at birth

The Further Education and Training Certificate (FETC) in ECD does not facilitate a career path or progression to higher education programmes. Patricia, Paige and Jane hold NQF level 5 qualifications but universities do not recognise these in terms of university entrance requirements. ECE training providers who offer continuing professional development for Grade R teachers should have a strong focus on strengthening teachers' instructional practice.

Furthermore, continuing professional development for Grade R teachers should be part of a broader national strategy to enhance the status of Grade R teachers. It should therefore be part of their ongoing professionalisation. Such a strategy should link with their registration with the South African Council for Educators (SACE) and the national system of continuing professional development for Grade R teachers.

Access to professional development can enhance Grade R teachers' job satisfaction and career advancement, especially if it leads to a qualification. Although continuous professional development for teachers does not necessarily have to lead to qualifications, various possibilities may need to be reconsidered in relation to Grade R teachers because the majority of them are underqualified. Grade R teachers require both professional development opportunities linked to qualifications and purely skills-oriented programmes. This constitutes an important strategy for professionalising the ECE sector in South Africa. In addition, it will ensure parity in the longer term for Grade R teachers in relation to their Foundation Phase colleagues.

Grade R teachers who complete Bachelor's degrees are likely to move into Grade 1 to 3 posts, unless the school governing body can offer them equitable remuneration. Anna was

the only participant in my study who has received a Gauteng Department of Education (GDE) bursary to undertake formal studies in Foundation Phase teaching at a higher education institution. She acknowledged that these studies are likely to result in her resignation as a Grade R teacher since she intends to pursue a Foundation Phase post.⁶¹ Anna's access to professional development enhanced her job satisfaction. Since she is teaching at a no-fee school, the School Governing Body is not able to equalise her remuneration. Her salary was the lowest of the participants in my study. Paige noted that although she wanted to enrol for a Bachelor's degree, she would remain in her Grade R post and was hopeful that her qualifications would be recognised by the Department of Education.

The Department of Education should reconsider the existing funding formula for the poorest schools, especially since no-fee schools in particular will not be able to retain Grade R teachers who complete degrees. The retention of Grade R teachers in Grade R posts is essential. The capacity and expertise of teachers undergoing and successfully completing professional development programmes should not be lost by these teachers seeking better remuneration in higher grades. A review of existing post provisioning is required to accommodate the appointment of qualified Grade R teachers on the same financial basis as other teachers.

Independent further study is largely unattainable for Grade R teachers. Jane, Paige and Patricia stated that the cost of further studies was a barrier to their professional development and career advancement. Jane is enrolled in a level 5 Higher Certificate programme at the University of South Africa. She noted that her progress was very slow because she could only afford to register for a limited number of modules each year. More scholarships and bursaries should be offered to Grade R teachers who wish to progress beyond level 5.

Some existing professional development opportunities are not relevant to Grade R. Paige noted that even though she had won a scholarship, the options available for further studies are not relevant to Grade R. In addition, she did not meet the admission requirements. Professional development opportunities should therefore be tailor-made for Grade R teachers.

⁶¹ This paradox is significant since Anna noted that it was not her first preference.

Qualified Grade R teachers are a valuable resource and their capacity should be utilised and shared. Takalani, Natasha, Jackie and Reinnette hold Higher Diplomas in Early Childhood Development and Isabel has completed a Bachelors Degree in Early Childhood Development and Foundation Phase. These five teachers collectively constitute a considerable Grade R resource. They have initiated site twinning with a poor school and are training those teachers to improve their curriculum implementation. This suggests that aspects of their curriculum implementation falls within the category of Hargreaves and Shirley's (2009) 'fourth way'. They are reaching out to poorer schools, have strong instructional leadership and are innovating with regard to curriculum implementation.

The implications of my findings for professional development are that such programmes should deepen teachers' pedagogical knowledge, and strengthen and support their instructional practice. As noted in Chapter 2, ongoing critical reflection on personal teaching practice allows teachers to assess their own teaching effort and to think deeply about their instructional practice, the extent to which they are effectively meeting the diverse needs of their learners, and how to *adapt* their teaching to enhance learning. Grade R teachers should therefore be encouraged to reflect on their instructional practice. This is also one of the essential roles of instructional leadership.

6.4.3.1 Implications for the Content of Professional Development Programmes

Several participants expressed the view that Grade R is unique and that Grade R teachers require specialised professional development programmes. The participants also stressed that there is an urgent need for the National Department of Education to clarify the difference between Grade R and Grades 1 to 3.

Professional development programmes should support teachers to *adapt* the official curriculum according to their specific context as well as to accommodate their learners' needs. They should furthermore focus on the important role of Grade R teachers in relation to the early identification, intervention and appropriate referral of learners requiring learning support.

Grade R teachers often experience tension between traditional ECE pedagogy and the pressure to implement an official curriculum. Several teachers and principals stated that they believe that the introduction of the official curriculum in Grade R was inappropriate because it is too rigid and formal, and they believe that children should learn through play. However, their instructional practice did not reflect this belief. This may suggest that Grade

R teachers need assistance in implementing the official curriculum in developmentally appropriate ways. It may also be useful for professional development providers to expose Grade R teachers to viable alternatives to workbooks and worksheets that could support the philosophy of learning through play. However, the provision of a rich variety of hands-on, concrete learning and teaching resources would not only be expensive, it needs to be accompanied by training on how to use such aids to enhance learning and teaching.

The qualified teachers were more consistent about the beliefs they articulated and their classroom practices, which demonstrates that they are able to implement the official curriculum through play.

There is a need to clarify how Grade R teachers could implement (integrate) the three Foundation Phase learning programmes—literacy, numeracy and life skills—during activities that have historically comprised the daily programme so that they are developmentally appropriate. A few examples could include the following: (i) mathematics concepts acquired through block play; (ii) literacy learning during fantasy play, songs, rhymes and stories, and (iii) life skills through social interaction and cooperation in group activities. It is notable that none of these activities involves the use of worksheets.

It appears that professional development programmes do not focus sufficiently on Grade R teachers' instructional practice. My findings suggest that there is a predominance of numeracy and literacy activities in Grade R classrooms. Only site D focused strongly on life skills. In addition, Grade R teachers with limited training relied heavily on scripted materials. As a result, these teachers did not offer many hands-on, concrete, developmentally appropriate activities. My classroom observations confirmed a predominance of workbooks and worksheets, which were supplied by the Department of Basic Education. In particular, Grade R teachers made extensive use of scripted materials such as the "All-in-One" series.

The daily programme in a Grade R classroom consists of activities such as block construction, building puzzles, modelling clay, fantasy play, gardening, outdoor free play, teacher-directed movement and music rings, and listening to stories. These activities present teachers with an ongoing challenge: there is little tangible 'evidence' of learning. Patricia articulated this clearly and she stands out as the participant most concerned about the assessment requirements of the NCS. Patricia has not had any training on the NCS, and she specifically mentioned requiring training on assessment methods and strategies.

Jane kept detailed assessment records as proof of what she did in her classroom. Paige attributed her use of worksheets to the intangible nature of many daily activities. In addition, Paige argued that it served the purpose of “showing parents what they are paying for”. Professional development programmes for Grade R teachers should help them to understand and practically implement a range of developmentally appropriate assessment strategies and methods in their classrooms.

6.4.4 Implications for Resources

The majority of the teachers who participated in this study were satisfied with their indoor resources and were aware of the importance of providing outdoor play opportunities. At three of the four sites, outdoor play equipment was lacking, and what was provided did not comply with municipal by-laws. In these cases the participants noted that outdoor play equipment is their main priority in terms of future resources.

The way in which Grade R classrooms are resourced reveals a school’s understanding of the pedagogical importance of Grade R. The Department of Basic Education does supply some resources, such as the pizza box Grade R kits containing worksheets and scripted lesson plans.⁶² However, the heavy emphasis on worksheets detracts from the effective use of indoor resources. Even where classrooms were well resourced, there was less and less time available during the daily programme to meaningfully engage in play-based activities. The qualified teachers used indoor free play⁶³ mainly when the children arrived and were waiting for the daily programme to begin, or while they waited for their parents to fetch them.

Alternatives to worksheets would require the provision of a large variety of indoor and outdoor play equipment. Besides being expensive to provide on a large scale, such concrete, hands-on resources would require the daily programme to be restructured to allow sufficient time for children to meaningfully engage in “learning through play”.

6.4.5 Implications for Support

As noted in Chapter 2, instructional leadership is essential in the context of curriculum change. The findings of my study suggest that Grade R teachers receive limited

⁶² The justification for such scripted material is that the majority of Grade R teachers are underqualified and require support to implement the NCS in their classrooms.

⁶³ These indoor free play activities consist of a rich variety of pedagogically structured play-based activities: block play, fantasy play, book corner, discovery area and quiet play area.

instructional support. In all instances, where the participants received such support, they reported that the Foundation Phase head of department asserted a strong influence on the content of learning and teaching in their Grade R classrooms. Where the Grade R teacher challenged this, it led to conflict. Paige, Patricia, Anna and Jane received instructional leadership from their heads of department, who had limited knowledge of Grade R. They did not regard their HoDs as credible instructional leaders. Their practice should be monitored and assessed on a continuous basis by knowledgeable and skilled ECD experts who should provide teachers with developmental and constructive feedback. The South African ECE field needs to define and develop a clearer understanding of what “playful learning” implies, specifically in the context of school-based programmes.

6.4.5.1 Teachers’ Beliefs and Attitudes

Teachers must be convinced that they are accountable for the effective implementation of the official policy because they are working in state-funded classrooms. This seems to be a minor reason to comply. Instead, teachers should understand the benefits for their learners of implementing the NCS. There appears to be a misconception of the implication of “learning through play” for teachers’ practice. Teachers appear to misinterpret “informal learning” as being spontaneous, unplanned and unstructured. According to the literature the teacher’s ability to implement play as a core component of the ECD curriculum requires careful planning and organisation in order for children’s learning to be purposeful (Ashiabi, 2007; Brownlee & Berthelsen 2006).

Grade R teachers need to share ideas with their colleagues and Foundation Phase teachers need to value the insights of their Grade R colleagues. Grade R teachers in particular, need to be encouraged to implement curriculum policy, rather than continuing to do as they please. In addition, they should be encouraged to understand class visits as an essential component of their professional development. They should experience the benefits of participating in communities of practice to learn from colleagues, plan collaboratively, and reflect on their practice, as well as receiving direct developmental feedback on their teaching. Teachers also need to understand the negative effects of professional isolation; specifically that it is much more difficult to improve instructional practice on one’s own, as opposed to through meaningful engagement with peers.

The participants had a strong sense of what their job responsibilities are and they *resisted* any extra burdens. They particularly *resisted* paper work which they experienced as an

“administrative burden”. Teachers’ responses in this regard were mixed and somewhat opportunistic: in terms of official compliance, they did as little as they could get away with.

6.5 Implications of the Study for Policy and Practice

My study advances knowledge on Grade R teachers’ responses to curriculum change. Since the Department of Basic Education (DBE, 2010) is currently in the process of developing the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS)⁶⁴, the findings of this study could be useful in anticipating how teachers may respond to CAPS. CAPS is expected to be implemented in the Foundation Phase from January 2011. Grade R teachers are expected to receive clarity on the content of teaching and assessment.

The lack of feedback from instructional leaders on the content and implementation of lesson planning suggests that principals, heads of departments and departmental officials need training themselves on how to provide meaningful support to Grade R teachers to enable them to positively implement curriculum change.

As noted in Section 5.9.2, teachers’ responses to curriculum change appear to fall into three main categories, depending on their primary focus, namely the (i) learner, (ii) curriculum, or (iii) teacher. Among the participants in this study, even those who focused primarily on the curriculum, did not manifest policy fidelity because their *adoption* of the NCS was often reluctant.

6.5.1 Recommendations that emerged from the study

More attention should be paid by policymakers to how to change Grade R teachers’ classroom practice. Their practice should be monitored and assessed on a continuous basis by knowledgeable and skilled ECD experts who should provide teachers with developmental and constructive feedback. The South African ECE field needs to define and develop a clearer understanding of what “playful learning” implies, specifically in the context of school-based programmes.

It seems essential for initial ECE teacher training to focus on the entire ECE spectrum— from birth to Grade 3. Such training should also include early stimulation, brain

⁶⁴ The CAPS will replace the existing GET Assessment policies and National Protocol for Assessment: Reporting and Recording. The brief for the CAPS reference committee is: (a) To develop a single comprehensive Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement for Grade R—12 (Foundation Phase, Intermediate Phase, Senior Phase and FET Phase) and (b) Provide clear guidelines on what teachers ought to teach and assess on a grade-by-grade subject basis (Department of Basic Education, 2010).

development, and early identification and prevention of barriers to learning, as well as appropriate referral and learning support.

All Grade R teachers should be exposed to best practice in Grade R. Departmental officials should promote and share the best practice that they encounter. Site twinning, where feasible, should be promoted. Grade R teachers require mentoring and coaching from experienced, qualified peers who understand how to implement the NCS appropriately.

Grade R teachers should be exposed to strategies for implementing the NCS through a play-based approach. This would assist them to understand how to facilitate learning through play while simultaneously meeting the requirements of the official curriculum. Such a strategy may have an influence on Grade R teachers' beliefs as well as their classroom practice.

Grade R teachers need mentoring and coaching from respectful and compassionate colleagues. Instructional leaders, whether school principals, Foundation Phase heads of departments, or GDE officials, should receive training and clear guidance regarding appropriate pedagogy in the Grade R arena. It is essential for Grade R teachers to perceive those providing instructional leadership as being credible and possessing the requisite knowledge and skills to advise them in terms of their classroom practice.

Teacher accountability should be promoted so that Grade R teachers understand the importance of their accountability in terms of policy implementation. Policymakers should promote accountability as part of a broader view of what professionalising the ECE field encompasses. In terms of professional development, unintended consequences such as the inability to retain the capacity being developed, require urgent attention.

6.6 Further Research

There has been limited South African research to inform ECE policy. We still do not know what ECE methodologies would be appropriate for the unique needs of South African Grade R teachers. Further research is needed to shape policy and practice on how to implement play-based learning in South African school-based ECE programmes. When reconsidering the literature on early learning standards, all the benefits discussed in Chapter 2 refer to the macro benefits for the country's economy, without highlighting the immediate benefits for learners themselves. Teachers must find the curriculum change

meaningful and relevant to their daily teaching task. It must make sense to them. How an official curriculum could benefit learners cannot be solved here. That would require further detailed, thorough research.

Another area for future study relates to Grade R teachers' resistance of instructional supervision from their heads of departments and district departmental officials. Since the international literature highlights the importance of instructional support, the lack of this in South Africa may mitigate against successful curriculum change.

The findings related to how parents influenced teachers' job satisfaction suggest that the underqualified teachers enjoyed a higher level of appreciation from parents than their qualified counterparts. Parents' awareness of teachers' qualifications, their expectations of the Grade R programme and how they want their children to be taught could constitute areas for future study.

6.7 Summary and Conclusion

I concluded my study in 2010, the year in which South Africa hosted the first ever FIFA World Cup™ in Africa. The tournament was accompanied by a prominent focus on “One Goal: Education for All”. As noted in Chapters 1 and 2, the introduction of universal access to a preschool (reception) year, to prepare children for school, is one of the priorities of the Education for All campaign. In South Africa the Grade R programme has gradually been phased-in alongside the application of the official curriculum. Despite repeated warnings that the focus should not be more heavily on numerical targets than on quality (OECD 2006), governments are mainly focused on access. Understanding how teachers are implementing the Grade R curriculum in their classrooms could therefore provide insight into how to enhance the quality of Grade R programmes. The Grade R teachers in my study viewed the NCS as developmentally inappropriate for their five-year-old learners. Although they manifested all four responses of my conceptual framework, they mainly *resisted*, *adopted* or *adapted* curriculum change. After six years of implementation, *ignoring* it completely is no longer a realistic option. Furthermore, they either reinterpreted their traditional practices as already being compliant with the NCS, or they implemented formal academic activities to develop school readiness skills. Instructional leadership should be developed in schools as well as in Departments of Education to support Grade R teachers in implementing the NCS appropriately. Once this competent leadership is in

place, Grade R teachers need to be convinced of how the NCS can be implemented in developmentally and culturally appropriate ways and how it could benefit their learners.

The examination of Grade R teachers' responses to the introduction of the official curriculum suggests that there is an urgent need to focus on teachers' understanding of what such a preparatory year-long programme should involve. Attempting to standardise what children should know and do before entering Grade 1 does not necessarily demand formal, rigid academic learning. Participants in this study asserted that the NCS is inappropriate because 5-year-olds are not yet ready for formal learning. Such a statement appears to indicate that they misunderstand the policy intentions. They did not appear to grasp that their teaching should still be purposeful and focused on meeting learning outcomes through well-designed and structured activities, or that it is possible to implement the official curriculum in appropriate ways (Goldstein, 2006; Ryan & Lobman, 2004). Grade R teachers need a sound conceptual understanding of what playful learning implies.

Despite reporting a decrease in job satisfaction as a consequence of the curriculum change, all the Grade R teachers in my study noted that their enjoyment of working with children had not diminished. To ensure that teachers respond positively to curriculum change, policy makers should convince them of the benefits for their learners.