

The impact of insufficient school readiness on learning in Grade 1: teachers' experiences and concerns

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**The impact of insufficient school readiness on learning in
Grade 1: teachers' experiences and concerns**

by

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DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

I, Marietjie Bruwer, hereby declare that this M Ed thesis:

*The impact of insufficient school readiness on learning in Grade 1:
teachers' experiences and concerns*

is my original work and that all the sources I have consulted, have been acknowledged.

Signature

Date

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DECLARATION OF LANGUAGE EDITED

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DECLARATION

I hereby certify that the following dissertation has been language edited:

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teachers' experiences and concerns

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SUMMARY

School readiness has a long-term effect on the development of a learner, including a successful school career, employment and the ability to contribute to society. The criteria for the personal readiness of the learner at school entry were proposed by the National Education Goals Panel (NEGP, 1991), and include physical well-being and motor development; social-emotional development; approaches to learning; language usage and communication skills; and cognitive skills and general knowledge.

As learning starts long before school entry, stimulation during the pre-school years should not be underestimated. External factors that have an impact on the personal readiness of the child include the expectations of the parents, the readiness of the school, preschool experiences and the environment of the child. Many studies have proven that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are less ready for formal learning than their more advantaged peers, since they are often deprived from attending good quality preschools. As a result they are at heightened risk for school failure, which has serious and long-lasting consequences.

In South Africa a significant number of young learners have not reached the required level of readiness to cope with formal learning in Grade 1, due to inadequate early learning experiences, which in most cases, is the result of poverty and deprivation. Instead of a smooth transition from the informal preschool environment to the formal learning environment of the Grade 1 classroom, these learners are traumatised by the fact that they cannot keep up with the pace and requirements of the formal learning situation, resulting in experiences of failure, discouragement and a poor self esteem which, in turn will have a negative long term effect on the academic performance of these learners.

School readiness is regarded as a multi-dimensional construct which, apart from the personal readiness of the learner, also includes the readiness of the school to support learners according to their diverse needs. Schools have a responsibility to provide positive learning environments as well as positive learning experiences for their learners. According to the teachers in this study their schools are not prepared to

support these learners by addressing their needs. Their predominant concern is the inaccessibility of the current curriculum for learners with insufficient school readiness.

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KEYWORDS and/or TERMS

- ❖ Impact
- ❖ School readiness
- ❖ Foundation phase
- ❖ Learning difficulties
- ❖ Concerns
- ❖ Criteria for school readiness:
 - Physical well-being and motor development
 - Social-emotional development
 - Approaches to learning
 - Language usage and communication skills
 - Cognitive skills and general knowledge

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
CHAPTER 1	
INTRODUCTION AND ORIENTATION TO THE STUDY	
1.1 INTRODUCTION	1
1.2 RATIONALE	4
1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS	5
1.3.1 MAIN RESEARCH QUESTION	5
1.3.2 SECONDARY QUESTIONS	5
1.4 RESEARCH AIM AND OBJECTIVES	6
1.4.1 RESEARCH AIM	6
1.4.2 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES	6
1.5 CONCEPT CLARIFICATION	7
1.5.1 IMPACT	7
1.5.2 SCHOOL READINESS	7
1.5.3 FOUNDATION PHASE	8
1.5.4 LEARNING DIFFICULTIES	8
1.5.5 CONCERNS	9
1.6 LITERATURE REVIEW	9
1.6.1 CRITERIA FOR SCHOOL READINESS	10
1.6.2 THE EFFECT OF POVERTY ON THE SCHOOL READINESS OF YOUNG LEARNERS	14
1.6.3 THE ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITY OF TEACHERS IN SUPPORTING LEARNERS WITH INSUFFICIENT SCHOOL READINESS	14
1.6.4 TEACHER COMPETENCE AND TRAINING	16
1.6.5 SUGGESTIONS FOR QUALITY EARLY LEARNING	17
1.7 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	18

	Page
1.8 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY	21
1.8.1 RESEARCH APPROACH AND DESIGN	21
1.8.2 DESCRIBING THE SAMPLE AND THE RESEARCH SITE	22
1.8.3 ROLE AS RESEARCHER	22
1.8.4 DATA COLLECTION	22
1.8.5 DATA ANALYSIS STRATEGIES	23
1.8.6 TRUSTWORTHINESS	24
1.9 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS	25
1.10 OUTLINE OF THE STUDY	25
1.11 CONCLUSION	27

---oOo---

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE STUDY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1	INTRODUCTION	28
2.2	THE IMPORTANCE OF SCHOOL READINESS FOR FORMAL LEARNING	28
2.3	THE MULTIDIMENSIONAL CONSTRUCT OF SCHOOL READINESS THROUGH THE LENS OF BRONFENBRENNER'S ECOLOGICAL THEORY	31
2.4	THE EFFECT OF POVERTY AND DEPRIVATION ON SCHOOL READINESS	36
2.4.1	THE EFFECT OF POVERTY ON THE FAMILY AS PRIMARY EDUCATION SYSTEM	37
2.4.2	THE GAP IN SCHOOL READINESS BETWEEN LEARNERS FROM POOR FAMILIES AND THEIR MORE ADVANTAGED PEERS	39
2.5	CRITERIA FOR THE PERSONAL SCHOOL READINESS OF THE LEARNER	42
2.5.1	PHYSICAL WELL-BEING AND MOTOR DEVELOPMENT	44
2.5.1.1	Expectations regarding the physical development of the Grade 1 learner	44
2.5.1.2	The effect of insufficient physical and motor development on formal learning	45
2.5.1.3	The role and responsibility of the teacher	46
2.5.2	EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING AND SOCIAL COMPETENCE	46
2.5.2.1	Expectations regarding the social-emotional development of the Grade 1 learner	46
2.5.2.2	The effect of insufficient social-emotional development on formal learning	50
2.5.2.3	The role and responsibility of the teacher	51
2.5.3	APPROACHES TO LEARNING	52
2.5.3.1	Expectations regarding approaches to learning in Grade 1	52
2.5.3.2	The role and responsibility of the teacher	53

	Page
2.5.4	COGNITIVE SKILLS AND GENERAL KNOWLEDGE..... 55
2.5.4.1	Expectations regarding the cognitive development of the Grade 1 learner..... 55
2.5.4.2	The effect of insufficient cognitive development on formal learning..... 56
2.5.4.3	The role and responsibility of the teacher..... 56
2.5.5	LANGUAGE USAGE AND COMMUNICATION SKILLS..... 57
2.5.5.1	Expectations regarding the language development of the Grade 1 learner..... 57
2.5.5.2	The effect of insufficient language development on formal learning..... 58
2.5.5.3	The role and responsibility of the teacher..... 59
2.6	CONCLUSION 59

---oOo---

	Page
CHAPTER 3	
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY	
3.1 INTRODUCTION	61
3.2 RESEARCH APPROACH	61
3.3 RESEARCH DESIGN	64
3.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS	65
3.4.1 PRIMARY RESEARCH QUESTION	66
3.4.2 SECONDARY RESEARCH QUESTIONS	66
3.5 RESEARCH CONTEXT	66
3.5.1 INTERPRETIVE PARADIGM	66
3.5.2 THE ROLE OF THE RESEARCHER	68
3.6 SAMPLE SELECTION	70
3.7 RESEARCH SITES AND PARTICIPANTS	71
3.8 DATA COLLECTION TECHNIQUES	73
3.8.1 SEMI-STRUCTURED FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS	73
3.9 DATA ANALYSIS	76
3.10 ADDRESSING CREDIBILITY AND TRUSTWORTHINESS	79
3.11 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS	82
3.12 SUMMARY	83

---oOo---

CHAPTER 4 DATA ANALYSIS AND RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1	INTRODUCTION	84
4.2	DESCRIPTION OF THE CASES	85
4.2.1	SCHOOL 1	85
4.2.2	SCHOOL 2	85
4.3	DATA ANALYSIS	86
4.4	RESEARCH FINDINGS	88
4.4.1	INSUFFICIENT SCHOOL READINESS OF THE LEARNERS	88
4.4.1.1	Language acquisition	89
4.4.1.2	Ability to listen and follow instructions	90
4.4.1.3	Physical well-being and fine motor development	91
4.4.1.4	Sense of responsibility and emotional development	92
4.4.2	CAUSES OF INSUFFICIENT SCHOOL READINESS	93
4.4.2.1	Language of instruction	93
4.4.2.2	Emotional coping skills	94
4.4.2.3	Parenting	95
4.4.2.4	Quality of preschool teaching	96
4.4.3	THE IMPACT OF INSUFFICIENT SCHOOL READINESS ON TEACHING	97
4.4.3.1	Disobedience as a result of a lack of listening skills	97
4.4.3.2	Overcrowded classrooms	98
4.4.3.3	Inability to work in groups	98
4.4.3.4	Diversity amongst learners	99
4.4.3.5	Lack of parental support	99
4.4.3.6	Assessment tasks	100
4.4.4	THE EFFECT ON THE LEARNER	101
4.4.4.1	Poor self-image	101
4.4.4.2	Problematic behaviour	101
4.4.4.3	Discouragement	102

	Page
4.4.5 MAIN CONCERNS OF THE TEACHERS	102
4.4.5.1 Learners cannot keep up with the pace and requirements	102
4.4.5.2 Insufficient time to lay a strong foundation	103
4.4.5.3 Excessive assessment	104
4.4.5.4 Supporting learners with insufficient school readiness	105
4.4.6 TEACHERS' SUGGESTIONS TO IMPROVE THE READINESS OF SCHOOL BEGINNERS	106
4.4.6.1 Improve the quality of preschool teaching	106
4.4.6.2 Inform and empower the parents to support their children	106
4.4.6.3 Homogeneous grouping of learners	107
4.4.6.4 Provision for playtime	108
4.5 SUMMARY	109

---oOo---

CHAPTER 5 INTERPRETATION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

5.1	INTRODUCTION	111
5.2	THE IMPACT OF INSUFFICIENT SCHOOL READINESS ON TEACHING AND LEARNING IN GRADE 1	113
5.2.1	TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES AND CONCERNS ABOUT THE INSUFFICIENT SCHOOL READINESS OF THEIR LEARNERS AND THE IMPACT THEREOF ON THE LEARNING PROCESS	114
5.2.1.1	Physical well-being and motor development	115
5.2.1.2	Emotional well-being and social competence	116
5.2.1.3	Approaches to learning	118
5.2.1.4	Language usage and communication skills	119
5.2.1.5	Cognitive skills and general knowledge	120
5.2.2	THE CAUSES OF INSUFFICIENT SCHOOL READINESS OF GRADE 1 LEARNERS THROUGH THE EYES OF THEIR TEACHERS	121
5.2.2.1	Ignorant parenting	122
5.2.2.2	Poor quality preschools	123
5.2.2.3	Language of instruction	124
5.2.3	TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES AND CONCERNS ABOUT TEACHING LEARNERS WITH INSUFFICIENT SCHOOL READINESS	125
5.2.3.1	Inaccessible curriculum – unrealistic pace and expectations	125
5.2.3.2	Policy issues: teacher-learner ratio	126
5.2.3.3	Policy issues: heterogeneous grouping of learners	127
5.2.3.4	Excessive assessment	127
5.3	RESEARCH FINDINGS THROUGH THE LENS OF BRONFENBRENNER'S ECOLOGICAL THEORY	128
5.4	CONCLUSION	131

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CHAPTER 6 SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1	INTRODUCTION	133
6.2	SUMMARY	134
6.2.1	A SHORT OVERVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ON SCHOOL READINESS RESEARCH	134
6.2.2	A SHORT OVERVIEW OF THE EMPIRICAL RESEARCH FINDINGS OF THIS STUDY	135
6.2.3	SIMILARITIES AND POSSIBLE CONTRADICTIONS BETWEEN THE LITERATURE AND MY EMPIRICAL RESEARCH FINDINGS	136
6.3	RESEARCH CONCLUSIONS	138
6.3.1	SECONDARY RESEARCH QUESTION NO.1	138
6.3.2	SECONDARY RESEARCH QUESTION NO.2	139
6.3.3	SECONDARY RESEARCH QUESTION NO.3	139
6.3.4	SECONDARY RESEARCH QUESTION NO.4	140
6.3.5	SECONDARY RESEARCH QUESTION NO.5	141
6.3.6	MAIN RESEARCH QUESTION	142
6.4	RECOMMENDATIONS	142
6.4.1	Recommendations for policy makers	143
6.4.2	Recommendations for practitioners	143
6.4.3	Recommendations for further research	144
6.5	CONCLUDING REMARKS	145
	REFERENCES	146
	APPENDICES	155

---oOo---

LIST OF TABLES

	Page
Table 1.1	13
Criteria for school readiness as found in the consulted literature	
Table 1.2	23
Phases in data collection	
Table 2.1	49
An adapted summary of the social-emotional learning (SEL) competencies by Denham and Brown	
Table 3.1	62
Key characteristics of qualitative research and the application thereof to this study	
Table 3.2	67
Assumptions of an interpretivist perspective and the application thereof to this study	
Table 3.3	72
Information about the research sites	
Table 3.4	73
Information about the participants	
Table 4.1	87
Themes and subthemes that emerged from the data	
Table 4.2	88
Coding of participants	
Table 4.3	108
Summary of themes and the responses of the participants	

---oOo---

LIST OF FIGURES

	Page
Figure 1.1 Components of school readiness	12
Figure 1.2 A model of the Ecological Theory of Bronfenbrenner	19
Figure 2.1 Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory of child development (adapted for the purpose of this study)	32
Figure 2.2 The child as the focus point of the Microsystem – children's personal school readiness resources	33
Figure 2.3 Microsystem I - School readiness resources in the family	34
Figure 2.4 Microsystem II – School readiness resources at the local school	35
Figure 2.5 Macrosystem – School readiness resources in the community	36
Figure 2.6 The effect of poverty and deprivation on school readiness through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory of child development	41
Figure 2.7 Self-regulation as bidirectional system linking emotion and cognition	54
Figure 5.1 A model of the impact of insufficient school readiness on teaching and learning in Grade 1	112
Figure 5.2 Research findings through the lens of the Ecological Theory of Bronfenbrenner (adapted for the purpose of this study)	129

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND ORIENTATION TO THE STUDY

1.1 INTRODUCTION

“It is universally recognised that the main objective of any education system in a democratic society is to provide quality education for all learners so that they will be able to reach their full potential and will be able to meaningfully contribute to and participate in that society throughout their lives” (Department of Education, 2007:1). It is also widely accepted that a child should be ready for school in order to gain full benefit from formal education. Van Zyl (2011a:83) states that school readiness has a positive effect on the school performance of a learner in the formal school situation, and stresses the fact that quality early learning experiences are essential in order to reach a required stage of school readiness. She refers to De Witt and Booyesen (2007) when defining school readiness as “a level of readiness ... for a learner to enter the formal education situation (which) includes aspects such as physical, cognitive, emotional, social and normative development” (Van Zyl, 2011a:83).

With the intention of addressing educational inequalities of the past, and also in agreement with the new democratic political dispensation which South Africa became part of in 1994, the Education White Paper 6 (2001) was released. According to this document the vision of inclusive education is to accept and respect the differences in learners’ abilities and learning needs, to develop educational structures and systems to meet the needs of all learners and to maximise the participation of all learners in educational institutions (Department of Education, 2001:16).

In South Africa a significant number of young learners have not reached the required level of readiness to cope with formal learning in Grade 1, due to inadequate early learning experiences, which in most cases, are the result of poverty and deprivation (Prinsloo in Landsberg, 2011:30). Growing up in a poor neighbourhood has a negative influence on school readiness and academic achievement, as well as on the physical development and behaviour of children (Halle, Zaslow, Zaff, Calkins & Margie, 2001:7). In the implementation of inclusive education, schools are expected to support learners with insufficient school readiness through early intervention

strategies in order for them to reach the required level of school readiness. This responsibility of the school is spelled out in the Salamanca statement (1994:11, 12) as follows:

“The fundamental principle of the inclusive school is that all children should learn together, wherever possible, regardless of any difficulties or differences they may have. Inclusive schools must recognise and respond to the diverse needs of their students, accommodating both different styles and rates of learning and ensuring quality education to all through appropriate curricula, organizational arrangements, teaching strategies, resource use and partnerships with their communities.”

Yet reality is often very different from visions and ideals. Numerous learners in our schools struggle with the formal learning process, due to insufficient academic support, large classes and the inability to deal with the demands of formal education. The majority of these struggling learners started their school career without the required level of school readiness, resulting in poor school performance (Green, Parker, Deacon & Hall, 2011:110). The Annual National Assessment (ANA) of 2011 confirms this alarming trend, and reports in the 2011 results for the assessment of more than 6 million Grade 3 learners, that the average performance in Literacy was 35% and in Numeracy it was 28% (Department of Education, 2011). In her response, Angie Motshekga, Minister of Basic Education stated that “the education sector needs to focus even more on its core functions of quality learning and teaching.” She continued by saying that “the development of the basic skills of reading, writing and numeracy at foundation levels” need to be the focus of attention (Department of Education, 2011).

When learners fail to reach the expected achievement levels at the end of their Grade 1 year, it is recommended by the Department of Education that they repeat Grade 1 in order to strengthen the foundation for the rest of their school career. They are, however only allowed to spend four years in the Foundation Phase and can therefore only be retained once in the Foundation Phase. Thereafter they have to advance to the Intermediate Phase regardless of their performance or intellectual and emotional capabilities. “A learner who does not meet the requirements for promotion can be progressed to the next grade in order to prevent the learner being retained in the Foundation Phase for longer than four years, excluding Grade R” (Department of Education, 2011:10). The implication of this regulation is that a significant number of Grade 3 learners who perform below the expected standard in the Annual National

Assessment, are progressed to the Intermediate Phase each year, without being ready for the academic challenges thereof. As a former foundation phase teacher, I am concerned about the alarming results of the Annual National Assessment (ANA) of the Grade 3 learners. From my own experience I know that those results reflect a three to four year long struggle of learners who had to start their school career without being ready for formal learning.

Hojnoski and Missall (2006) claim that young children who experience learning difficulties early in their school career, are at risk of getting caught in a negative cycle of learning problems, antisocial behaviour and withdrawal from the school environment. The ANA results of 2011 indicate that this might be the case for the majority of Foundation Phase learners in South Africa. Reasons may be that many learners are admitted to Grade 1 without being ready for formal learning. These learners experience learning difficulties right from the beginning of their school career and it is mainly the responsibility of the Foundation Phase teachers to support their learners in overcoming these learning difficulties, in order to acquire the essential academic skills for the Intermediate Phase. Dednam (2011) states that “these difficulties should be resolved in the first two grades of school as learners who proceed to higher school levels find it hard or even impossible to overcome such difficulties” (Landsberg, 2011:155).

After conducting a quantitative longitudinal panel study to determine the influence of school readiness on school performance in Grade 1 and Grade 7 with specific reference to Home Language and Numeracy, Van Zyl (2011b:43) concluded that “school readiness does, in fact influence school performance in a highly significant way.” She also found a “highly significant correlation between school performance in Grade 1 and Grade 7” and stated that “school readiness has an indirect influence on Grade 7 performance” (2011b:40). The same learners who were struggling with formal learning in Grade 1 were still experiencing learning difficulties in Grade 7. Therefore “the emphasis should be placed on the Foundation Phase (Grade R) and prior (to) Grade R, as this forms the base for all further learning and school performance” (Van Zyl, 2011b:40). Insufficient school readiness and the learning difficulties resulting from that should therefore be identified and dealt with as soon as possible in order to give struggling learners a better chance to a successful school career.

Accordingly this study will explore the experiences and concerns of Foundation Phase teachers in supporting Grade 1 learners who experience learning difficulties due to insufficient school readiness.

1.2 RATIONALE

Winter and Kelley (2008:262) stress the importance and effects of school readiness when saying “educators agree that early intervention with high-quality school readiness programs offers advantages to individual children and families and is also economically beneficial to society, because it builds a stronger workforce and improves the quality of life for all citizens.” Early identification and intervention therefore are essential requirements for successfully supporting Grade 1 learners with learning difficulties, in order to improve their chances of a successful school career.

The question is to what extent Foundation Phase teachers are equipped to render this type of support to Grade 1 learners who are unable to cope with formal learning, due to insufficient school readiness. In my experience as a Foundation Phase educator with specific training in learning support, only a limited number of teachers have the skills and experience to offer learning support. I have seen numerous cases where teachers rush to get through the prescribed curriculum, leaving behind the learners who are unable to keep up with the rest of the class. This is confirmed by the document ‘Barriers to learning and development’, which states that: “Sometimes educators, often through inadequate training, use teaching styles which may not meet the needs of some of the learners” (Department of Education, 2007:7). The backlog which these learners subsequently experience tends to increase at an alarming rate, leading to feelings of failure, helplessness and inferiority. As a result the self-image and confidence of these learners are affected negatively. Le Cordeur (2010:79) agrees when stating that “learners who are struggling often develop a poor self-image and ... feel like outsiders in the classroom and among their peers.”

It is my view that pre-service training as well as in-service training of Foundation Phase teachers in the early identification of learning difficulties and the implementation of intervention strategies in order to successfully support learners with diverse educational needs, should be a priority.

From the literature it is clear that school readiness is and always will be a very important aspect to consider in preventing learning difficulties (see section 2.2). Although numerous studies (see sections 1.6.1 and 2.5) were conducted over the years to determine the criteria for school readiness and the factors leading to a lack thereof, little is known about the experiences of Grade 1 teachers in working with learners lacking school readiness and the concerns they have about successfully supporting these learners in overcoming their learning difficulties. For the purpose of this study the focus was on the experiences of Foundation Phase teachers in supporting Grade 1 learners who are not ready for formal learning due to a lack of stimulation in the pre-school years and/or insufficient school maturity.

Through conducting this study, more light was shed on the concerns of Foundation Phase teachers in supporting Grade 1 learners with learning difficulties due to insufficient school readiness and the fact that their learners are unable to keep up with the pace and requirements of the formal learning process. Findings and recommendations from this study are essential for the Department of Education in devising measures to support schools through district officials, as well as for Foundation Phase teachers who need to identify learning difficulties at an early stage in order to implement intervention strategies as soon as possible.

The knowledge gained from this study is also valuable in contributing to strengthen the Learning Support modules in Foundation Phase teacher training programmes at Higher Educational Institutions.

1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1.3.1 MAIN RESEARCH QUESTION

How do Grade 1 teachers experience the impact of insufficient school readiness on teaching and learning in their classrooms and what are their concerns regarding this issue?

1.3.2 SECONDARY QUESTIONS

- What are the criteria for school readiness according to the literature on school readiness?

- How do teachers experience the school readiness of their learners when they enter Grade 1?
- What do Grade 1 teachers regard as important causes of insufficient school readiness?
- What are Grade 1 teachers' perceptions about the impact of insufficient school readiness on the teaching and learning process in their classes?
- How do Grade 1 teachers experience the implementation of the curriculum with regard to learners with insufficient school readiness?

1.4 RESEARCH AIM AND OBJECTIVES

1.4.1 RESEARCH AIM

The aim of this study is to investigate the experiences and concerns of Grade 1 teachers regarding the impact of insufficient school readiness on teaching and learning in their classrooms.

1.4.2 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this study are to:

- determine the criteria for school readiness according to the literature on school readiness;
- investigate Grade 1 teachers' experiences of the level of school readiness of their learners at school entry;
- explore the important causes of insufficient school readiness, according to Grade 1 teachers;
- find out what the perceptions of Grade 1 teachers are about the impact of insufficient school readiness on teaching and learning in their classrooms and
- learn more about the experiences of Grade 1 teachers regarding the implementation of the curriculum with regard to learners with insufficient school readiness.

1.5 CONCEPT CLARIFICATION

For the purpose of this study the following concepts: impact, school readiness, learning difficulties, Foundation Phase and concerns will be explained and further used as such.

1.5.1 IMPACT

According to Hornby (1983:424) 'impact' can be defined as a "strong impression or effect", which implicates a difference in the degree of intensity between 'impact' and 'effect'. Furthermore 'effect' is defined as the "result or outcome" of an impact (Hornby, 1983:276-277). Pickett (ed, 2000) defines 'impact' as "a strong, immediate impression or effect of one thing on another", while Hawker and Waite (eds. 2007, p.417) define 'impact' as a strong effect or influence with negative consequences or repercussions. For the purpose of this study the concept 'impact' will refer to the strong, negative effect of insufficient school readiness on teaching and learning in Grade 1.

1.5.2 SCHOOL READINESS

As indicated in the Introduction, Van Zyl (2011a:83) defines school readiness as "a level of readiness ... for a learner to enter the formal education situation (which) includes aspects such as physical, cognitive, emotional, social and normative development." She continues by saying that school readiness includes school maturity, and states that "school readiness cannot be reached without school maturity" ... "a biological and neurological process of growth that cannot be forced or accelerated" due to each child's unique tempo of growth and development. On the other hand, "if learners' school maturity is intact, they can be stimulated towards school readiness, which can be accelerated" (Van Zyl, 2011a:83).

According to Halle, Zaslow, Zaff, Calkins and Margie (2001:2), the National Education Goals Panel (NEGP) distinguishes between three important components of school readiness, namely readiness in children, readiness of schools and in the third place, the readiness of the family and community to support the development of the child. As far as children's readiness for school is concerned, they point out that it should be regarded as multi-faceted and continue to highlight five dimensions of children's readiness for school, according to the NEGP, namely physical well-being

and motor development; social and emotional development; approaches to learning; language development as well as cognition and general knowledge (2001:2).

Powell (2010:26) regards school readiness as a difficult concept to define. She argues that the definition of school readiness depends on the context in which it is used, since teachers, parents and paediatricians all have different ideas about school readiness. She refers to Graue (1993) when she conceptualises school readiness as “a characteristic of an individual child that develops as the child grows” and “something within a child that is necessary for success in school” (2010:26). Powell (2010) distinguishes between “eligibility for school entrance” as a date on a calendar and school readiness as “something that resides within the child.”

For the purpose of this study the concept ‘school readiness’ will refer to the required state of personal school readiness of learners when entering the formal teaching environment in Grade 1, the readiness of the parents and the community to provide quality stimulation during the preschool years of the learner, as well as the readiness of the schools to support learners with insufficient school readiness in the Grade 1 classroom.

1.5.3 FOUNDATION PHASE

In South Africa the Foundation Phase refers to Grades R-3, of which Grades 1-3 are the first three years of children’s compulsory formal school career. Grade R is included as the first year of the Foundation Phase, prior to Grade 1, but it is not compulsory for all learners yet. Grade R is the equivalent of Kindergarten in American literature. “In the United States kindergarten is usually the first year of formal public school before first grade” (Meaux, 2006:13).

1.5.4 LEARNING DIFFICULTIES

Swart and Pettipher (2011: 19) define barriers to learning as “factors which lead to the inability of the system to accommodate diversity, which lead to learning breakdown or which prevent learners from accessing educational provision”, and continue by saying that these factors may be internal (located within the learner) or external (located within the school, the education system or the broader social, economic and political context). According to these authors the following barriers to

learning were identified in the South African context: socio-economic deprivation, including poverty; barriers arising from impairments; negative attitudes to differences; an inflexible curriculum; language barriers; inadequate support services; inadequate policies and legislation, as well as a lack of parental support (Swart & Pettipher in Landsberg, 2011:19-20).

For the purpose of this study the concept 'learning difficulties' refers to the difficulties that Grade 1 learners encounter when they are confronted with the formal learning process which they are not ready for and struggle to cope with, due to insufficient school readiness, caused by the above mentioned internal and external factors. Learners with permanent physical and/or sensory impairments are excluded from this study.

1.5.5 CONCERNS

The concerns of teachers can be seen as the important educational matters they think about and would like to do something about (Fuller & George, 1978). These concerns can be either negative, in cases of problematic issues, or positive in cases of opportunities and can thus also be described as topics of interest and importance, relating to individual teachers' experiences. Hawker and Waite (eds. 2007, p.149) define 'concerns' as issues of "interest, importance, relevance (and) significance" (noun), while 'concern' as a verb is defined as "worry, trouble, unsettle, make anxious." In this study the concept 'concerns' refers to the feelings of worry and frustration that Grade 1 teachers experience when supporting learners who are unable to keep up with the pace and requirements of the Grade 1 curriculum.

1.6 LITERATURE REVIEW

Green et al. (2011:110) state that quality learning opportunities in the early years have a significant impact on a child's development and future school career, especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. They refer to UNESCO (2007) when saying that children are vulnerable and fragile during their pre-school years and point out that the majority of children in South Africa are deprived from quality learning opportunities in the years before they enter school (2011:110). As a result these learners do not reach the required level of school readiness by the time they start school and they do not meet the criteria necessary to be regarded as ready

for formal learning. The following aspects regarding school readiness will subsequently be discussed: criteria for school readiness, the effect of poverty on the school readiness of young learners, the role and responsibility of teachers in supporting learners with insufficient school readiness, teacher competence and training and suggested interventions from recent literature.

1.6.1 CRITERIA FOR SCHOOL READINESS

Winter and Kelley (2008:263) point to the fact that since the early 1990's the view of school readiness was expanded and "school readiness was characterized as a multidimensional concept that encompassed broader aspects of development beyond specific cognitive tasks and literacy skills." They conclude that school readiness programmes now also need to address "motor development, physical health, and dispositions toward learning", as well as "the 'readiness of schools' to support children's early learning and school readiness" (Winter & Kelley, 2008:263). From this definition it is clear that school readiness does not focus on cognitive abilities alone, but has the holistic preparedness of the learner at heart. Similarly Van Zyl (2004:148-149) mentions the following criteria for school readiness: general and specific cognitive skills, language abilities, perceptual and motor skills, emotional development, literacy readiness, situational readiness, cultural readiness, as well as self-regulating skills.

According to Halle et al. (2001:2) physical well-being and motor development include health status, growth, physical abilities such as gross and fine motor skills, as well as conditions before, at, and after birth that could have an effect on the child's development. Van Zyl (2011b) explains physical school readiness as sensory development and maintains that it "relies heavily on perceptual adequacy." She claims that cognitive school readiness goes "hand in hand with perception" and that "the one cannot be complete without the other." Cognitive school readiness includes well developed levels of observation, attention span, thought, memory, visualising and fantasising, as well as a reasonable understanding of numbers, the ability to analyse and synthesise and an adequate level of language development (Van Zyl, 2004:150). Halle et al. (2001:2) state that cognition and general knowledge also include the ability to look for similarities, differences and associations, as well as knowledge of shapes, spatial relations and number concept (2001:2).

In order to be ready for formal learning, the learner needs to be emotionally stable which is achieved through “loving care, unconditional acceptance, encouragement, recognition and praise that the child receives from the educator.” (Van Zyl, 2004:150). Halle et al. (2001:2) stress the fact that young learners should also have “the ability to express their own feelings and understand the feelings of others.” Van Zyl (2004:151) describes normative school readiness as “the acceptance of authority, task-orientation, task-completion, sense of responsibility, the ability to communicate and to share, as well as the ability to regulate himself (and) to accept challenges, to tackle tasks and to make sense of the normative content.” Halle et al. refer to normative school readiness as approaches to learning which include “enthusiasm, curiosity, and persistence on tasks, as well as temperament and cultural patterns and values.”

As far as social school readiness is concerned the learner must be able “to function as part of a group and make a contribution to the group”, but he/she must also be able to function independently (Van Zyl, 2004:151). For Halle et al. (2001:2) social development includes “the ability to interact with others, take turns and cooperate.”

Literacy readiness is an important part of school readiness, which includes a love for books, an eagerness to learn and considering reading as challenging, but pleasant (Van Zyl, 2004:151-152). In addition to this, Halle et al.(2001:2) state that the required language development for school beginners includes verbal language, such as listening, speaking and vocabulary, as well as emerging literacy such as story sense and the writing process.

The different components of the personal school readiness of the Grade 1 learner as discussed above are illustrated in Figure 1.1 (see next page). A more detailed summary of the different components of the school readiness skills expected from a Grade 1 learner, as found in the literature consulted during this literature review, is presented in Table 1.1 (see p.13).

Van Zyl (2004:158-159) concludes by stating that “school readiness needs to be seen in a holistic way (and) if any one of the domains of development is affected, it will influence the child’s school performance accordingly.” Learners who start their school career without the required level of school readiness, according to the above

mentioned criteria for school readiness, “have a significantly greater risk for difficulties such as peer rejection and poor academic achievement” (Van Zyl & Van Zyl, 2011:12-13). Children from poor families are especially vulnerable in this regard, since they have worse nutrition and more physical health problems, as well as lower levels of cognitive development and more emotional and behavioural problems than children from average income families (Halle et al. 2001:5).

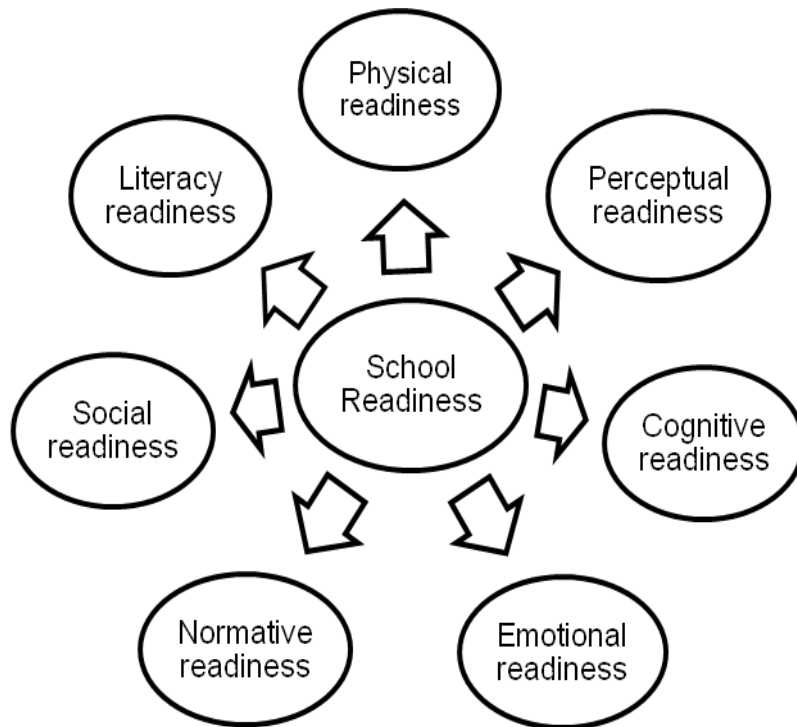


Figure 1.1: Components of School Readiness

Table 1.1: Criteria for School Readiness as found in the consulted literature (refer to section 1.6 Literature Review)

Physical Readiness	Perceptual Readiness	Cognitive Readiness	Emotional Readiness	Normative Readiness	Social Readiness	Literacy Readiness
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health status • Growth • Gross motor skills • Fine motor skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Laterality • Spatial orientation • Midline crossing • Auditory skills • Visual skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Observation • Attention span • Thought • Memory • Visualising • Fantasising • Ability to analyse and synthesise • Reasonable understanding of numbers • Language acquisition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional stability • Ability to express own feelings • Understand feelings of others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accept authority • Task orientation • Task completion • Sense of responsibility • Communicate and share • Regulate own behaviour • Accept challenges • Understand normative content • Enthusiasm • Curiosity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Function in a group • Make a contribution to a group • Function independently • Take turns • Cooperate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Verbal language: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Listening ○ Speaking ○ Vocabulary • Love for books • Eagerness to learn • Consider reading as a pleasant challenge • Emerging literacy – story sense

1.6.2 THE EFFECT OF POVERTY ON THE SCHOOL READINESS OF YOUNG LEARNERS

According to Van Zyl (2004:151) disadvantaged learners coming from low socio-economic environments, lack situational school readiness due to inadequate perceptual and cognitive development, financial difficulties and unstable interpersonal relationships, and according to her, these learners are “considered to be high-risk learners in respect of school success.” Hojnoski and Missall (2006:605) agree that “children from a low socio-economic background tend to have ever increasing gaps in general cognitive competencies, which can already be seen at an age of three.”

Van Zyl and Van Zyl (2011:11) state that the environment in which disadvantaged learners function, both inside and outside the home, cause high levels of stress for these learners and point out that research has shown that high levels of stress “may have a negative influence on school readiness and school performance.” These environmental stressors include insufficient facilities and housing, physical threats, financial difficulties, health issues and transport problems. Apart from these stressors, poor schools and poor health services add to the problem.

According to Winter and Kelley (2008:264-266) the negative effect of poverty on the school readiness of young children is still underestimated. In this regard, they state that serious challenges still exist in providing high-quality school readiness programmes for all children, especially those in poverty, and claim that children from many communities still do not have access to early educational programmes which can enhance their school success. They are convinced that poverty causes unfavourable social, health and educational outcomes for children, but claim that “poor children who enrol in high-quality programs that provide intensive, child-focused early intervention and comprehensive family support services can beat the odds” (Winter & Kelley, 2008:265). The role and responsibility of Foundation Phase teachers in supporting these learners should not be underestimated.

1.6.3 THE ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITY OF TEACHERS IN SUPPORTING LEARNERS WITH INSUFFICIENT SCHOOL READINESS

Hojnoski and Missall (2006:603) state that “poor-quality early education has contributed to an alarming number of children arriving at kindergarten without the

academic and social skills needed for school success” and raise the concern that many schools may not be ready to meet the diverse needs of these children. In this regard they specifically refer to children from poor families who do not have access to quality pre-school education programmes and are therefore not ready to face the challenges of formal learning. The same concern about schools not being ready to support learners with insufficient school readiness, is raised by Winter and Kelley (2008:261) when saying that “schools themselves are often ill-prepared to provide learning environments that stimulate children’s early learning in developmentally appropriate ways ... through play and exploration,”

According to Ntombela (2011:6) teachers have an important role to play in creating an inclusive society through providing inclusive education and their attitudes towards supporting learners with learning difficulties will determine their commitment in implementing intervention strategies. Inclusive education implies that all learners should be given a chance to reach their academic potential irrespective of their abilities or barriers to learning and that the teacher is the main instrument to reach this goal (Department of Education, 2001). In this regard Winter and Kelley (2008:261, 262) refer to “the powerful effects that well-qualified teachers in well-designed early care and education settings can have on child and family outcomes” and continue to say that the quality of teacher training seems to have a significant effect on the social, behavioural and academic development of learners.

Hojnoski and Missall (2006:604) suggest that to work towards positive outcomes, the focus should be on “the readiness of the child to enter school as well as the readiness of the school to receive the child and meet the child’s individual developmental needs” by using dynamic assessment strategies and working closely with the parents. Winter and Kelley (2008:261) also suggest “shifting the focus to preparing early care and education settings to be ready for all children, regardless of their developmental status.”

Halle et al. (2001:3) claim that schools that are prepared to support the learning and development of young children, reach out to parents and learners in order to ensure a smooth transition between home and school, offer high quality instruction to help children learn, are committed to the success of every individual learner, provide intervention to children who are falling behind and adapt teaching strategies to the benefit of the children.

Looking at the above mentioned characteristics of schools that are ready to support struggling learners, it is clear that competent, well qualified teachers are needed if the learning difficulties of Grade 1 learners, suffering from insufficient school readiness, are to be addressed successfully.

1.6.4 TEACHER COMPETENCE AND TRAINING

According to Green et al. (2011:115), South Africa is experiencing a serious shortage of well qualified teachers in the Foundation Phase. They conducted a study to investigate the Foundation Phase teacher provision by public higher education institutions, in order to determine whether South African universities provide enough newly trained Foundation Phase teachers to meet the country's needs on both national and provincial level. According to their findings, South African universities could only provide 27.8% of the estimated need for Foundation Phase teachers in 2009. Apart from the fact that the provision of newly qualified Foundation Phase teachers is insufficient, Green et al. (2011:111) state that many teachers who are currently teaching in the Foundation Phase, are either not professionally trained for the Foundation Phase, or are very poorly trained. They point out that being placed with low-performing teachers at the beginning of their school career, has a serious effect on the progress of young learners that will most likely be irreversible (Green et al. 2011:118). Swart and Pettipher (2011) refer to the Education White Paper 6 (2001) when stating that “classroom teachers are the primary resource for achieving the goal of inclusive education” by meeting the diverse needs of their learners and providing quality education for them, implying that teachers should be equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to do so (Swart & Pettipher in Landsberg, 2011:20). Landsberg (2011:69) argues that teachers need intensive training, “either as part of their initial training or as well-planned in-service training by competent and experienced people.”

The professional development of teachers is an important innovation strategy that the Department of Education has to make use of if quality education is to be provided to all learners (Ntombela, 2011:13). The focus of the professional development of teachers needs to be on positive attitudes, knowledge, skills and values that will enable them to perform their tasks well and implement the policy of inclusion successfully.

1.6.5 SUGGESTIONS FOR QUALITY EARLY LEARNING

Based on the challenges that were identified through the Annual National Assessment, the Minister of Basic Education, Angie Motshekga, stated that the emphasis on Early Childhood Development and Grade R will be increased, “aiming for universal access to Grade R in 2014” (Department of Education, 2011).

Van Zyl (2011a:91) believes that insufficient school readiness can be identified at a very early stage, and if addressed in time, can prevent learning difficulties. She refers to Feinstein and Bynner (2004:1329-1339), stating that “much is going on in the child’s life across the middle years of childhood that can enhance or impede progression, even reversing achievements or failures established during the early years.” Furthermore, she recommends that all learners in South Africa should attend good Grade R classes in their home language and should be tested for school readiness before entering Grade 1 in order to identify problem areas, because “learning problems that are identified early can still be rectified to better performance up to Grade 7” (Van Zyl, 2011b:40).

According to Halle et al. (2001) young children need to be exposed to literacy activities in their pre-school years, both at home and in pre-school programmes, in order to enhance their readiness for reading instruction in the formal learning situation. They argue that children have more success with reading if they were exposed to books at home from a very young age and if their parents read to them. In this regard, children from low-income families have a disadvantage, because their families struggle financially and are often unable to expose them to books (Halle et al. 2001:7).

With specific reference to learners from low income families, Van Zyl and Van Zyl (2011:15) suggest that early learners and their families should be trained in “how to use life skills in dealing with difficult demands” and that teachers should be empathetic and understanding in supporting disadvantaged learners in their personal and social development. Winter and Kelley (2008:266) claim that “quality school readiness programs can result in long-term benefits, including higher academic achievement throughout a child’s schooling (and) into adulthood.” According to them the most beneficial school readiness programmes are the ones providing “comprehensive social, educational, and health services to both children and their

families.” They argue that school readiness is no longer a child or family issue, but “a community and societal issue with serious impact.”

Green et al. (2011:112) suggest that in order to improve the readiness and school performance of learners, “the teachers hold the key to success, especially in low-income areas.” According to these authors, providing enough excellent Foundation Phase teachers appears to be the solution to improve learner performance in the Foundation Phase. They believe that a school system can perform well if they “get the right people to become teachers”, “develop these people into effective instructors”, and ensure that they have systems and support in place to the benefit of every child (Green et al. 2011:112).

As far as continuous training for Foundation Phase teachers is concerned, Ntombela (2011:7-8) states that the professional development of teachers needs to be an ongoing process that will enable them to keep on improving their abilities according to the needs of the learners and concludes that the professional development of teachers is therefore essential in providing quality education in the Foundation Phase.

Piotrkowski, Botsko and Matthews (2001:540) point out that all aspects of a child’s life that play a role in the learning readiness of the child should be taken into consideration when the phenomenon of school readiness is being investigated. These include the personal readiness of the learner, the responsibilities of parents and caretakers, teachers who are ready to address the diverse needs of the learners and supportive communities. A useful theoretical framework for this study is the Ecological Theory of Bronfenbrenner, as this theory provides a lens through which the whole life-world of the child can be observed (Cushon, Vu, Janzen & Muhajarine, 2011:186).

1.7 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Anfara and Mertz (2006:xvii) state that “a useful theory is one that tells an enlightening story about some phenomenon. It is a story that gives you new insights and broadens your understanding of the phenomenon.” They continue by saying that a theoretical framework can be used to analyse, interpret and make sense of “the social setting being studied” (Anfara & Mertz, 2006:xxv). For the purpose of this

study, the Ecological Theory of Bronfenbrenner (1970) is used as a framework for exploring and analysing the experiences and concerns of Grade 1 teachers in supporting learners suffering from insufficient school readiness, by enlightening all the different aspects that play a role in the life-world of school beginners. A model of the Ecological Theory of Bronfenbrenner as illustrated by Swart and Pettipher (2011:13) is presented in Figure 1.2.

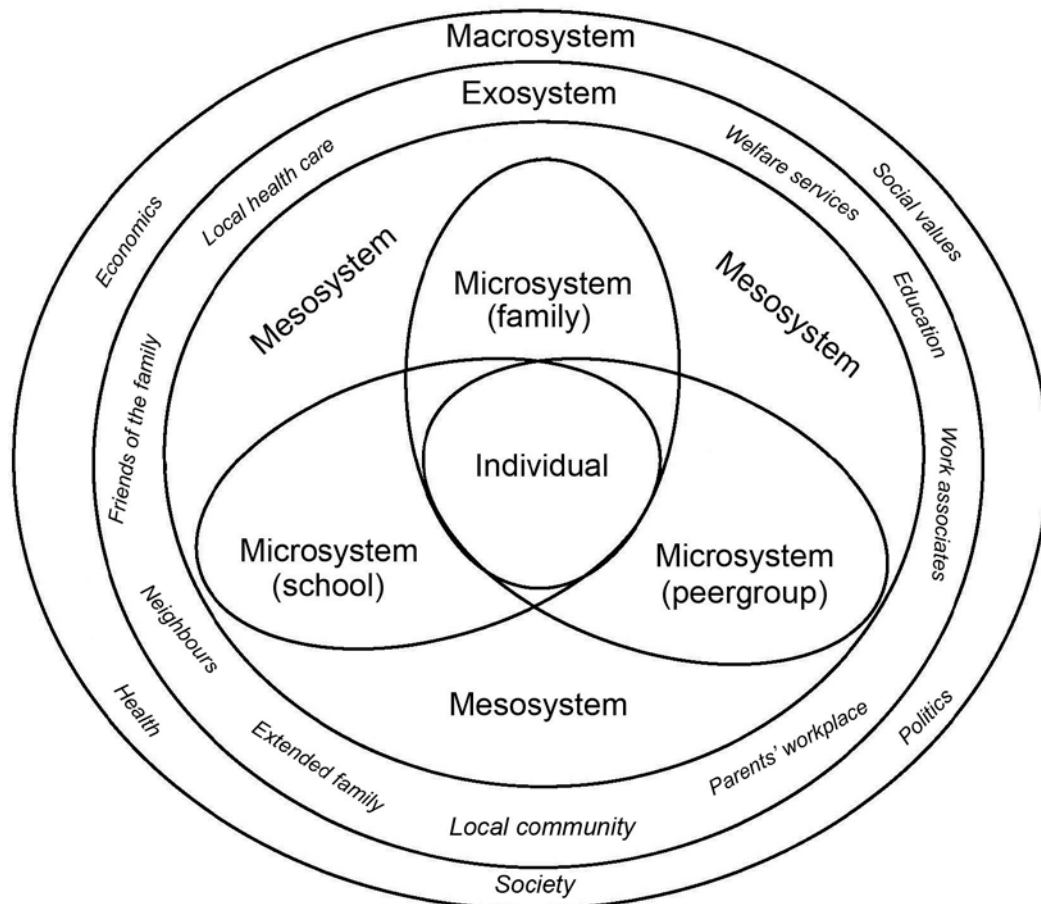


Figure 1.2 A model of the Ecological Theory of Bronfenbrenner (as illustrated by Swart & Pettipher, 2011:13)

Swart and Pettipher (2011:13) state that Bronfenbrenner (1970) developed the Ecological Theory in order to explain the direct and indirect influences on a child's life, which play a role in the development of the child. The social context or environment in which the child lives can be seen as different systems influencing each other. Bronfenbrenner distinguished between five systems, namely the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and the chronosystem. The following summary of these five systems is based on the discussion by Swart and Pettipher (2011:14-15) as well as Chan (2012).

The microsystem of the Ecological Model of Bronfenbrenner (1970) represents the immediate environments of the child in which he lives and develops. These include the home environment, the school environment and the peer group, in other words the contexts in which the child has face to face contact with others.

The mesosystem presents the interaction between the different contexts of the microsystem, for example the contact between the parents and the school or the contact between the parents and the peer group. The exosystem represents the contexts of the child's life-world which have an indirect influence on the child, for example the parent's workplace, the education system or the extended family. The cultural and political issues, as well as social values and economics are represented by the macrosystem. Finally the chronosystem represents the timeframe or dimension of time at a specific point in history.

For the purpose of this study, the Ecological Model of Bronfenbrenner serves as theoretical framework and was adapted in order to provide a lens through which the life-world of the school beginner can be observed. The individual learner as school beginner is focus point of the microsystem. The home environment of the learner and the Grade 1 classroom are investigated as the immediate environments of the learner (microsystem) and the interaction between the Grade 1 teacher and the parents of the Grade 1 learner as the mesosystem. Aspects of the exosystem, that influence the learner indirectly and play a role in the learner's transition to the formal learning environment, are investigated, namely the education system, education policies and the current curriculum. The macrosystem mainly represents the socio-economic environment of the selected schools and that of the learner's home environment. Finally the chronosystem represents the current post-apartheid era in South Africa.

The Ecological Theory of Bronfenbrenner is useful in exploring the school readiness levels of Grade 1 learners, as well as the factors playing a role in the preschool development and stimulation of these learners. Investigating the experiences and concerns of the Grade 1 teachers regarding the impact of insufficient school readiness on the teaching and learning process in their classrooms, through the lens of my theoretical framework helped me to reach a better understanding of the issue at hand (see section 2.3 for a more detailed discussion).

1.8 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

1.8.1 RESEARCH APPROACH AND DESIGN

A qualitative approach was followed in this non-representative case study and information was collected from a small number of individuals. Creswell (2008:213) states that in a qualitative study, the intent is not to generalise, but to “develop an in-depth understanding of a central phenomenon”, in this case school readiness. Nieuwenhuis (2007) points out that the emphasis should be on the quality and depth of the information while exploring the phenomenon through the eyes of the participants (Nieuwenhuis in Maree, 2007:51). This study aimed to explore the experiences and concerns of Grade 1 teachers in supporting learners who find it hard to cope with formal learning due to insufficient school readiness.

Creswell (2008) defines a case study as “an in-depth exploration of a bounded system ..., based on extensive data collection” and continues to explain ‘bounded’ as “separated out for research in terms of time, place, or some physical boundaries” (2008:476). Nieuwenhuis (2007) states that from an interpretivist point of view, a case study aims to reach a comprehensive understanding of how participants in a specific situation make meaning of the phenomenon under investigation (Nieuwenhuis in Maree, 2007:75). Through conducting a case study, I envisaged to reach a better understanding of the experiences of Grade 1 teachers in supporting learners who lack school readiness and the concerns they have about the progress of these learners.

In a multiple instrumental case study (or collective case study) two or more cases are studied, described and compared in order to provide insight into a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2008:477). According to Stake (2005:445-446) a number of cases can be chosen and studied simultaneously, since understanding them will lead to a better understanding of an issue or phenomenon. As the core of this study was to explore the perceptions of Grade 1 teachers regarding their experiences and concerns in supporting learners with learning difficulties due to insufficient school readiness, I opted for this research design, because it would enable me to gain the information needed to better understand the issue of insufficient school readiness.

1.8.2 DESCRIBING THE SAMPLE AND THE RESEARCH SITE

According to Creswell (2008:214) researchers make use of purposeful sampling in qualitative research and “intentionally select individuals and sites” that are rich in information, to learn about or understand a phenomenon. For Stake (2005) the primary criterion for sampling is the opportunity to learn and therefore the case from which we can learn most, should be selected (Stake, 2005:451-452). Two urban schools in Pretoria, currently accommodating learners from disadvantaged backgrounds were selected as sample for this non-representative case study. All the Grade 1 teachers from the selected schools were asked to take part in the research and a focus group interview was conducted at each school. I assumed that the best information could be collected from teachers who were trained in Foundation Phase teaching and are now teaching learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. Both experienced and beginner teachers were interviewed in order to explore their experiences about the level of school readiness of their learners and their concerns about the impact thereof on teaching and learning.

Interviews were conducted at sites chosen by the different participants, in order to create a similar psychological environment, namely a place where each interviewee felt comfortable to talk about the issue at hand.

1.8.3 ROLE AS RESEARCHER

Since semi-structured interviews were conducted as data collection technique, the roles of interviewer, interpreter and analyser were adopted. As the researcher had no involvement in what occurred in the research setting, the researcher was a complete outsider, attempting to collect the data “in a way that allows the participants to respond naturally and honestly” (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001:348).

1.8.4 DATA COLLECTION

Based on the literature, relevant themes were selected and semi-structured questions were compiled for focus group interviews with the Grade 1 teachers of the selected schools. According to Creswell (2008) interviewees can “best voice their experiences unconstrained by any perspectives of the researcher or past research findings” when responding to open-ended or semi-structured questions (2008:225).

These predetermined questions allowed for probing in order to further explore the perceptions of the interviewees (Nieuwenhuis, 2007:87) regarding the impact of insufficient school readiness on the teaching and learning process in Grade 1.

The aim of these semi-structured interviews was therefore to see the phenomenon under investigation through the eyes of the interviewees and collect rich, descriptive data (Nieuwenhuis, 2007:87) that enabled me to better understand their point of view concerning insufficient school readiness of Grade 1 learners.

The interviews were recorded with the permission of the interviewees and were transcribed for data analysis. The phases in which data was collected are presented in Table 1.2.

Table 1.2: Phases in data collection

Phases in data collection		
Phase	Data collection strategy	Objective
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ethical clearance Contact and correspond with participants 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Permission to conduct study Explain the aim of the study and obtain access to sites
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conduct a semi-structured focus group interview with the Grade 1 teachers at school 1 Perform a preliminary analysis of the first focus group interview 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explore the research context (inductive) Adapt interview questions if necessary
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conduct a semi-structured focus group interview with the Grade 1 teachers at school 2 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Obtain a better understanding of the perceptions of the interviewees (deductive)
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Transcription of data Thematic analysis of the data 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interpret the data

1.8.5 DATA ANALYSIS STRATEGIES

In order to make sense of the data and answer the research questions, I followed the steps suggested by Creswell (2008:243-266) in analysing and interpreting qualitative data. The first step was to prepare the data for analysis, by transcribing the audio-taped interviews and read through the transcripts to develop a general sense of the data and make notes of first impressions. Placing the data in computer files and

developing a matrix or table of the different interviews, was helpful in organising the data. The transcript of each interview was then read and explored to look for the underlying meanings in text segments, which were coded. From these codes, I looked for emerging themes. The themes were described in detail and the data was reread to look for new information on each theme. When saturation was reached and no new information could be added to the themes, I confirmed with the participants that I had adequately interpreted their perceptions.

Creswell (2008:258-259) recommends a further thematic analysis by layering and interrelating the themes and in doing so, adding additional insight into the study. I then attempted to answer the research questions by displaying the findings visually in a table and constructing a narrative discussion to explain what I have learned from the data analysis. Finally I interpreted the findings by giving an overview of the findings, comparing it to past research in the literature, applying it to the theoretical framework of the study and personally reflecting on the meaning of the data.

1.8.6 TRUSTWORTHINESS

Nieuwenhuis (2007:113-115) states that “trustworthiness is of the utmost importance in qualitative research” and mentions a number of guidelines which I followed in order to enhance the trustworthiness of my study. Submitting my transcripts of the interviews with the Grade 1 teachers to some of the interviewees to correct possible errors ensured that my interpretation of what they have shared during the interviews was accurate. For the same reason I carried out stakeholder checks to enhance the credibility of my findings by asking some of the interviewees to comment on my research findings, interpretations and conclusions. McMillan and Schumacher (2006:330) argue that validity of qualitative research lies in “the degree to which the interpretations have mutual meanings between the participants and the researcher.” I also kept a journal during the data collection and data analysis process of the decisions I made, how I analysed the data and how I arrived at interpretations, which will help others to follow my reasoning.

In reporting my findings, I maintained confidentiality and anonymity of the interviewees by protecting their identities. As the aim of qualitative research is to gain a better understanding of the perspectives of the interviewees, I did not attempt to generalise my findings, but rather sought insight into the experiences and concerns

of the teachers who took part in the study. As suggested by McMillan and Schumacher (2006:330), I actively searched for, recorded, analysed, and reported negative or discrepant data that might contradict my findings, as this added to the validity of my research. After completing the study, I conducted an external audit as suggested by Creswell (2008:267), by asking a person outside the project to thoroughly review the study and report back about the strengths and weaknesses of my research.

1.9 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Creswell (2008:238) states that conducting qualitative research “requires a sufficient level of trust based on a high level of participant disclosure” and points out important guidelines which need to be followed in order to proceed ethically. In adhering to these guidelines, I first of all applied for ethical clearance for my study from the Ethics Committee of the University of Pretoria. Once this had been approved, I informed the principals of the selected schools about the purpose of my research, asked permission to enter the research sites and issued the informed consent forms to the participants, stating clearly that participation was voluntary and that they might withdraw at any time. I made sure that the purpose and the procedure of the research process were clear to everyone involved and assured them of their rights, namely to stay anonymous, ask questions and have insight in the findings. Maintaining their trust was important to me and therefore I clearly stated my role as researcher, respected my participants as well as the research sites and ensured the confidentiality of the data.

1.10 OUTLINE OF THE STUDY

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND ORIENTATION TO THE STUDY

Chapter 1 serves as an introduction and orientation to the study, stating the background, rationale and research questions that guided the study. A preliminary literature review is presented and the theoretical framework that underpinned the interpretation of the research findings is introduced. Furthermore the research methodology is explained and ethical issues are briefly addressed.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE STUDY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In Chapter 2 recent literature on school readiness research is presented and discussed in order to clarify the multi-dimensional nature of school readiness, the effect of poverty and deprivation on school readiness, as well as the role and responsibility of the Grade 1 teachers in supporting learners with insufficient school readiness. The Ecological Theory of Bronfenbrenner is discussed as a useful tool in understanding the different systems which either have a direct or an indirect influence on the development of the preschool learner.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research process and methodology which guided my study is discussed in Chapter 3. The research approach, design and data collection methods are presented. The method used for data analysis is explained, as well as measures taken to ensure credibility and validity. Ethical considerations are stated.

CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS AND RESEARCH FINDINGS

The research sites are described in Chapter 4 in order to give the reader background information with regard to the phenomenon under investigation. The research findings are presented according to the themes and sub-themes that emerged during the data analysis.

CHAPTER 5: INTERPRETATION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

In Chapter 5 the empirical research findings are discussed with reference to recent literature on school readiness research in order to compare the findings of this study to previous studies on school readiness. The research findings are also presented through the lens of the ecological theory of Bronfenbrenner, which served as theoretical framework for this study.

CHAPTER 6: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In Chapter 6 I conclude the study by presenting a brief summary of the literature on school readiness research and the empirical research findings of this study. Similarities and possible contradictions between the literature and the empirical research findings of this study are briefly stated. Conclusions are drawn by first answering the secondary research questions and finally the main research question

which guided this study. Recommendations are made for practitioners, policy makers and further research.

1.11 CONCLUSION

In Chapter 1 the orientation of the study is presented, indicating the rationale for the study and the research questions that guided the study. A preliminary literature review is presented and the theoretical framework is introduced. The research methodology is briefly explained and ethical considerations are mentioned. Chapter 1 served as the map that guided me through the research process in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the impact of insufficient school readiness on the teaching and learning process in Grade 1 as experienced by Grade 1 teachers.

In Chapter 2 an in-depth literature study is presented on recent school readiness research and the theoretical framework is discussed and adapted for the purpose of the study.

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CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE STUDY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 INTRODUCTION

School readiness is an important factor in predicting children's academic achievement (Furlong & Quirk, 2011:88). Much research has been done on school readiness because of its importance for a smooth transition to the formal learning environment in Grade 1, as well as for long-term academic achievement (Al-Hassan & Lansford, 2009:217). In this regard, Chan (2012:641) refers to the worldwide emphasis that is being placed on the transition from preschool to Grade 1.

The alarming results of the Annual National Assessment (mentioned in Chapter 1), namely that the majority of Grade 3 learners in South Africa perform far below the expected academic standard, urge me to ask whether these learners entered the formal learning environment in Grade 1 with the essential school readiness skills they needed for academic success.

Since the purpose of this study is to explore the impact of insufficient school readiness on learning in Grade 1, with specific focus on the experiences and concerns of the class teachers in this regard, the focus of the literature study will be on the multidimensional construct of school readiness and the importance thereof for formal learning. I shall also investigate the criteria for the readiness of the Grade 1 learner with specific reference to the effect of poverty on each criterion and the role and responsibility of the class teacher in supporting struggling Grade 1 learners. Finally I aim to explore some of the interventions suggested in the literature that might be helpful to teachers when addressing insufficient school readiness.

2.2 THE IMPORTANCE OF SCHOOL READINESS FOR FORMAL LEARNING

School readiness has a long-term effect on the development of a learner, including a successful school career, employment and the ability to contribute to society (Lapointe et al. 2007:473-474). Furlong and Quirk (2011:88) state that school readiness is the most important factor in predicting academic progress, while Chan

(2012:639-640) argues that children who experience a smooth transition to school and early school success perform better academically as well as socially and emphasises that the transition to the formal learning environment is one of the most important changes that takes place in early childhood.

When children enter the formal learning environment in Grade 1, they are faced with many new challenges. Li-Grining, Votruba-Drzal, Maldonado-Carreno and Haas (2010:1062) mention that these young learners are expected to work independently, complete learning tasks, follow a strict class routine and acquire literacy and mathematics skills. They point out that the readiness of children to meet these demands at school entry consists of their prior knowledge and the skills they enter school with. According to Duncan et al. (2006:4)¹ children who are ready for formal learning, will be able to pay attention, manage their own behaviour, relate to their teacher and their peers and in doing so, will be able to master the concepts taught in the early grades. These children have an advantage when starting school because they have a solid foundation on which they can build (Al-Hassan et al. 2009:225). Since school readiness is so important for academic progress, the focus should be on early childhood education in order to prepare young children for a successful transition to Grade 1 (Al-Hassan et al. 2009:225).

Janus and Duku (2010:376) claim that school readiness does not suddenly happen just before a child enters school, but should rather be seen as the result of the child's life experiences up to that point. In this regard Magnuson and Shager (2010:1186) agree when asserting that learning starts long before school entry and point out that the rate of children's development during the pre-school years should not be underestimated. Young children need social and cognitive stimulation in order to acquire the language and cognitive skills needed for formal learning. Low income families are often unable to provide such care and therefore the learning experiences of children from disadvantaged backgrounds are limited (Magnuson, Meyers, Ruhm & Waldfogel, 2004:117). Since they are not exposed to appropriate stimulation, they might not be able to meet the expectations of the formal learning environment at school entry (Janus et al. 2010:376). Cushon et al. (2011:184) stress the fact that children with insufficient school readiness start their school career with a backlog, are

¹ Greg J. Duncan, Chantelle J. Dowsettb, Amy Claessensa, Katherine Magnusonc, Aletha C. Hustonb, Pamela Klebanovd, Linda Paganie, Leon Feinsteinf, Mimi Engela, Jeanne Brooks-Gunng, Holly Sextonh, Kathryn Duckworthf, and Crista Japeli.

unable to catch up with their peers and their academic progress tends to decline from there onwards. They continue by stating that these children are likely to experience failure in the classroom, which will result in a loss of confidence that may negatively influence their future academic progress. Janus et al. (2010:377) point out that the differences in academic abilities between children who are ready for formal learning at school entry and those who are not, will remain throughout their school careers and claim that the gap is likely to widen over time.

In order to create better opportunities for early childhood development in a country where many children grow up in poverty, Lazarus et al. (2007:54) suggest that high-quality preschool programmes should be implemented to ensure that these children are provided with the essential stimulation and instruction that will prepare them for school entry. In this regard Furlong et al. (2011:82, 88) mention a number of studies that have been undertaken to explore the impact of the preschool years on children's school readiness and state that the positive impact of quality preschool programmes on academic and social development is essential for children from low-income backgrounds. They come to the conclusion that quality preschool experiences make a significant difference in school readiness. Similarly Magnuson, Ruhm and Waldfogel (2006:18) found that children who were exposed to quality preschool programmes start their school career with better academic skills than their peers who experienced other types of child care. Lazarus et al. (2007:63) take this argument further when stating that quality preschool experiences facilitate increased academic performance and lead to better lifestyle and health choices as well as better occupational outcomes, while Pagani, Fitzpatrick, Archambault and Janosz (2010:984) argue that quality preschool experiences and a smooth transition to the early grades have a significant effect on academic attainment throughout a child's school career and beyond.

It is clear that attending preschools where quality programmes are offered is essential for ensuring school readiness, especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Magnuson et al. (2007:49) state that children from poor families will benefit from early education programmes, since they are less likely to experience a stimulating environment at home. Unfortunately they are also less likely to have access to early education programmes (Magnuson et al. 2007:33). Furlong et al (2007:33) confirm this point when stating that children from poor families have less

access to quality preschools, which will probably lead to lower levels of school readiness by the time they enter Grade 1.

2.3 THE MULTIDIMENSIONAL CONSTRUCT OF SCHOOL READINESS THROUGH THE LENS OF BRONFENBRENNER'S ECOLOGICAL THEORY

School readiness can be defined as “a multidimensional construct that incorporates all aspects of a child’s life that contribute directly to that child’s ability to learn” (McGettigan & Gray, 2012:16). These aspects include children who are ready to learn, schools that are ready to accommodate learners with diverse needs, as well as parents and communities who support learners’ development (Roberts, Lim, Doyle & Anderson, 2011:117). Piotrkowski, Botsko and Matthews (2001:540) point to the fact that every aspect of a child’s life that is important for success in school should be taken into consideration, including the responsibility of families, schools and communities to provide positive learning environments for their children and/or learners. This fact is also echoed by Cushon et al. (2011:186) who assert that individual as well as contextual factors play a role in school readiness. According to McGettigan and Gray (2012:15) the external factors that have an impact on school readiness include the expectations of the parents, the readiness of the school, preschool experiences and the environment of the child. In other words a child’s development is influenced by the immediate family environment as well as a number of intertwined environments or contexts outside the family.

In this regard Cushon et al. (2011:186) refer to the ecological theory of Bronfenbrenner (Illustrated in Figure 2.1) when saying that a child’s development is influenced by contextual factors outside the immediate family environment, such as the neighbourhood and the school. Chan (2012:641) points out that Bronfenbrenner suggested “a mutually dependent, mutually beneficial and mutually growing relationship between individuals and environments that can be regarded as co-existence or a co-existent organised system.” According to Chan (2012:641) the key principles of Bronfenbrenner’s theory are that children influence the contexts they live in and that those contexts influence the children’s development at the same time.

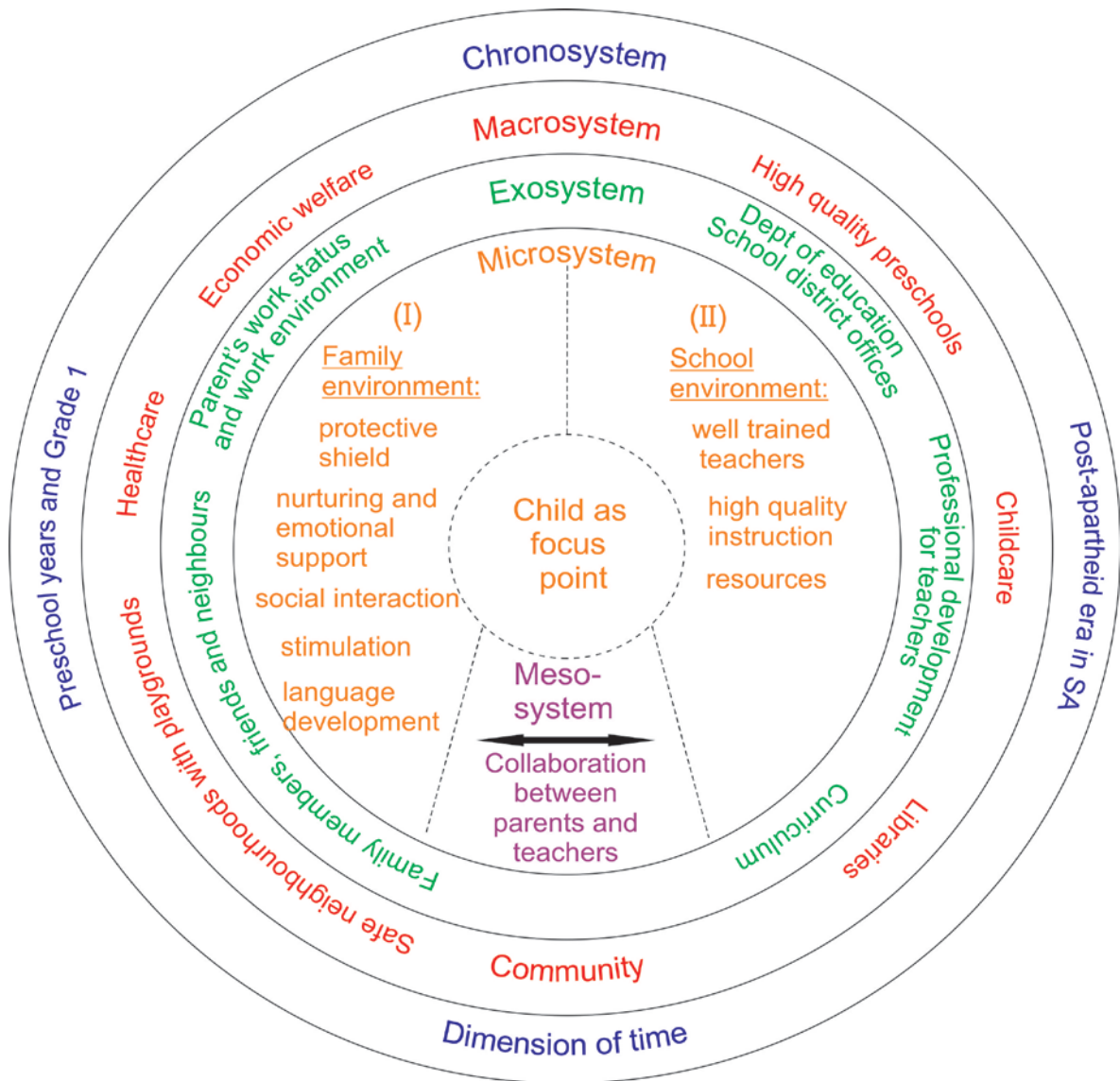


Figure 2.1: Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory of child development (adapted for the purpose of this study)

In the discussion that follows, the different systems of the ecological theory of Bronfenbrenner will be presented in the same colours as the ones used in Figure 2.1.

Taking a closer look at the different aspects influencing a child’s development and readiness to learn, also referred to as ‘resources’ (Piotrkowski et al. 2001:540), the comprehensive list provided by Piotrkowski et al. (Figures 4, 5 and 6) serves as a useful framework for understanding the complexity of school readiness, referred to by Chan (2012:641) as the “multidimensional matrix of school readiness.” The contexts in which these resources are imbedded, match the contextual variables of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory of child development. This theory explains the contexts or systems that have a direct or indirect influence on the development of a

child (Swart & Pettipher, 2011:13). For the purpose of this study the child will be the focus point of the microsystem and will be discussed as such.

Lapointe, Ford and Zumbo (2007:474) state that school readiness might previously have been defined as a state of academic readiness, including cognitive and language development, but lately various other aspects of child development, namely physical development, consisting of health and motor skills, as well as social-emotional development are included in the definition as well. Once children enter school, they need to adjust to the demands of the formal learning situation where they will be expected to follow instructions, complete tasks, interact with teachers and peers as well as manage their own emotions and behaviour (Lazarus & Ortega, 2007:60). In order to comply with these expectations a child needs to be physically, cognitively, emotionally and socially prepared (Al-Hassan & Lansford, 2009:217). Piotrkowski et al. (2001:540) refer to these aspects as the “*personal readiness resources*” of the learner that are needed for the successful transition to the formal learning environment and mention five specific aspects of children’s personal readiness resources namely physical well-being and motor development; social and emotional development; approaches to learning; language use; and cognition and general knowledge. Roberts et al. (2011:117) refer to these five aspects of children’s readiness for formal learning as the five “major skill areas”, while for Cushon et al. (2011:184) “school readiness refers to the various competencies that children require at the time of school entry”, including the physical, social, behavioural, cognitive and communication skills children need for the smooth transition to Grade 1. These aspects of children’s readiness to learn are illustrated in Figure 2.2 and will be discussed under the heading ‘Criteria for school readiness’.

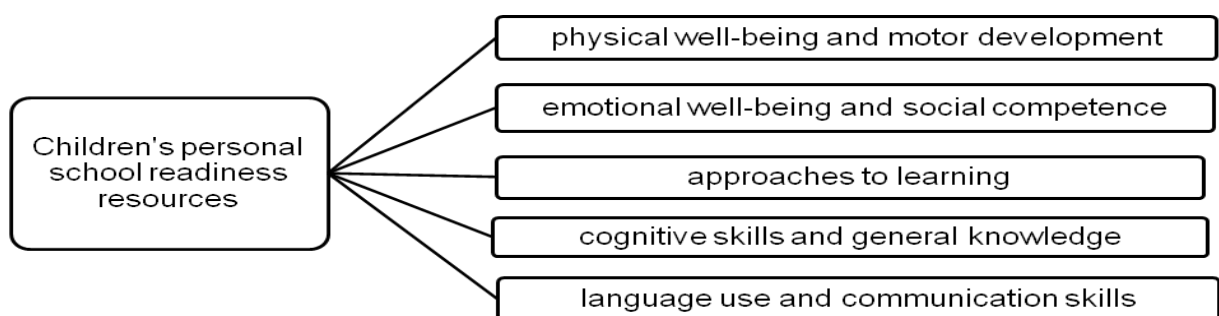


Figure 2.2: The child as the focus point of the microsystem - Children’s personal school readiness resources

The microsystem with the child as the focus point, include all the interpersonal relations and experiences of the child in environments that involve face-to-face contact, for example with the immediate family, school or peer group (Guhn & Goelman, 2010:206; Swart & Pettipher, 2011:14). According to Swart and Pettipher (2011:14) the microsystem should support the child emotionally, physically, socially as well as cognitively and should serve as a protective shield. It can however become a risk factor in, for example, cases of poverty. For the optimal development of their child, parents need to provide a nurturing family environment (Figure 2.3: Microsystem (I)) where the child's emotional and physical needs are taken care of and where the child is exposed to social interaction and opportunities for language development. Financial resources and social support from family members and friends outside the immediate home environment (exosystem) are needed in order for parents to provide these essential school readiness resources (Piotrkowski et al. 2001:540, Roberts et al. 2011:117).

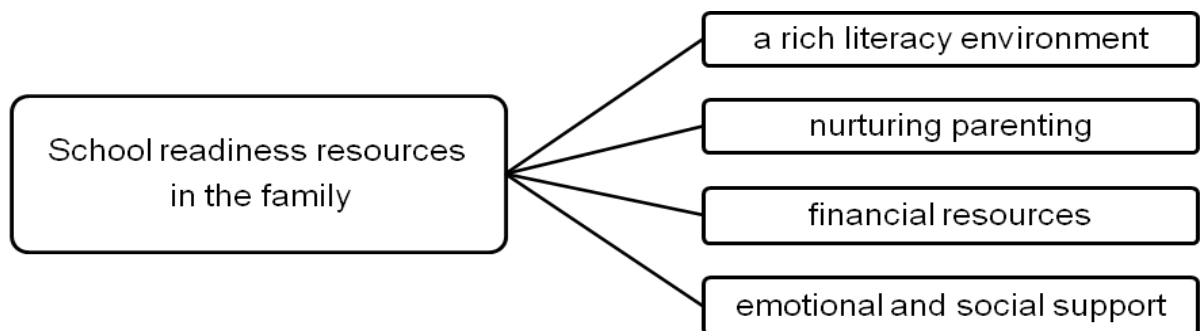


Figure 2.3: Microsystem (I) – School readiness resources in the family (Piotrkowski et al. 2001:540)

Ideally, children should attend a local school (Figure 2.4: Microsystem (II)) close to their homes that can provide all the school readiness resources needed to ensure the best possible learning environment for each child. High quality, individualised instruction can only be provided by well trained teachers who are involved in continuous professional development and supported by principals and the department of education (Piotrkowski et al. 2001:540).

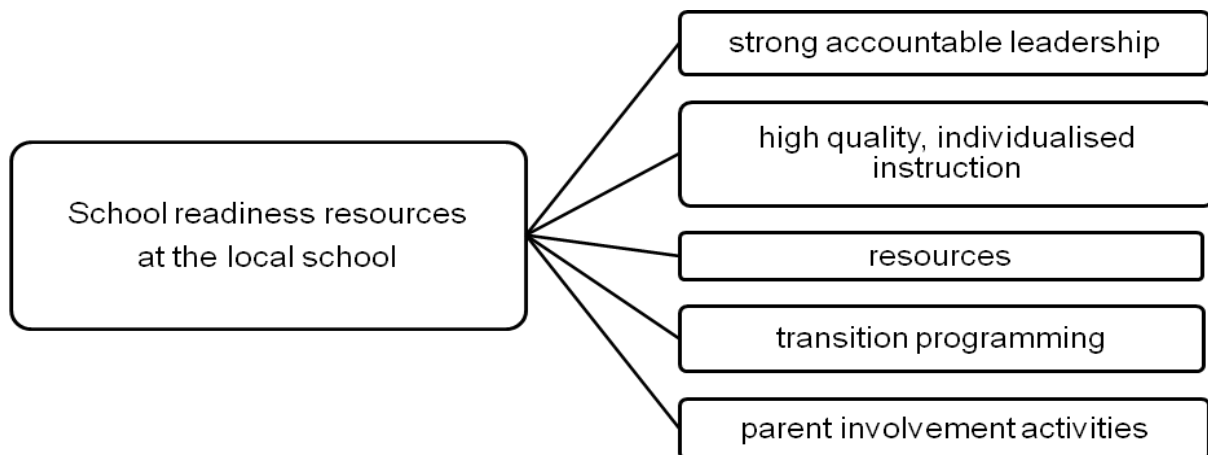


Figure 2.4: Microsystem (II) - School readiness resources at the local school
(Piotrkowski et al. 2001:540)

Careful planning for the smooth transition from the preschool environment to the formal learning environment is essential, as well as creating opportunities for parental involvement in children’s school experiences (Roberts et al. 2011:117, Chan, 2012:641). The mesosystem refers to the interaction between two or more of the microsystems, for example between the home and the school (Guhn & Goelman, 2010:206; Swart & Pettipher in Landsberg, 2011:14) and will be used as such for the purpose of this study.

The exosystem refers to contexts where the child is not directly involved, but which influences the immediate environment of the child. For the purpose of this study the exosystem will in the first place refer to the parent’s work status and/or work environment that affect/s the quality of the parent’s relationship with, and care for the child (Guhn & Goelman, 2010:206; Swart & Pettipher in Landsberg, 2011:14), as well as support systems that are available for the parent/s such as friends, family members and neighbours who might be able to support parents financially or provide supervision for children. In the second place the exosystem will refer to the current curriculum, the support available for teachers from the school district offices as well as opportunities for continuous professional development of teachers.

The macrosystem (Figure 2.5) refers to “social and economic structures and the attitudes, beliefs, values and ideologies inherent in the systems of a particular society and culture” (Swart & Pettipher in Landsberg, 2011:14). The effect of the neighbourhood or community on the school readiness of the child should not be

underestimated. For optimal development children need to grow up in safe neighbourhoods with playgrounds, libraries and high quality preschools that can contribute to their physical, emotional, social, cognitive, and language development (Piotrkowski et al. 2001:540, Roberts et al. 2011:117, Chan, 2012:641). In South Africa the majority of young children do not have these opportunities due to the disadvantaged neighbourhoods they grow up in.

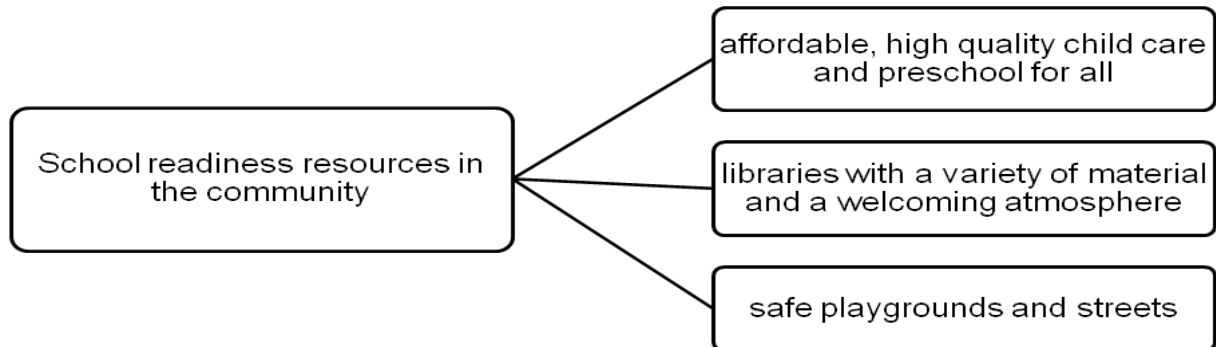


Figure 2.5: Macrosystem - School readiness resources in the community (Piotrkowski et al. 2001:540)

The chronosystem of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory refers to the dimension of time and relates to the interaction between the various systems as well as the influence thereof on the development of the child (Swart & Pettipher, 2011:15). Reviewing the literature for factors that contribute to young children’s unpreparedness for formal learning, it is clear that poverty is a significant cause of insufficient school readiness. For the purpose of this study, the chronosystem will represent the preschool years of the young child and the effect that poverty has on the school readiness of the individual child in a time of economic hardship during the post-apartheid era in South Africa.

2.4 THE EFFECT OF POVERTY AND DEPRIVATION ON SCHOOL READINESS

According to Al-Hassan and Lansford (2009:218) many studies have proven that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are less ready for formal learning than their more advantaged peers. Piotrkowski et al. (2001:537) state that children living in poverty are at heightened risk for school failure, which has serious and long-lasting consequences. Similarly Li-Grining et al. (2010:1065) argue that poor parents are

less likely to provide high quality cognitive stimulation to their children due to limited economic resources and high levels of stress.

Despite the progress that has been made in addressing poverty since 1994, the majority of young children in South Africa are still affected by poverty (UNICEF, 2009:xvi). These children grow up in poor communities where they are exposed to malnutrition, crime and a lack of preschool stimulation (UNICEF, 2009:8), which may well explain why they are unable to cope with the formal learning process in Grade 1.

2.4.1 THE EFFECT OF POVERTY ON THE FAMILY AS PRIMARY EDUCATION SYSTEM

Han, Lee and Waldfogel (2012:772, 779) state that family socio-economic status (SES), determined by the level of the parents' education, income and occupation plays an important role in the development of their children and point out that parents with low SES are unable to provide quality preschool care for their children, which results in low levels of school readiness. Mistry, Benner, Biesanz, Clark and Howes (2012:433) mention that children growing up in poverty often face various risks, including inadequate housing; dangerous neighbourhoods; limited economic resources; a lack of sensitive parental care, support and stimulation; limited access to community services and health care as well as inadequate schools. Similarly Janus and Duku (2010:378, 394) state that low income families experience a number of disadvantages that affect the home environment and the quality of childrearing. They continue by pointing out that children's school readiness is affected by socio-economic, demographic and family factors and argue that children from poor families will most likely be vulnerable by the time they enter school due to their economic disadvantages. Azzi-Lessing (2010:1) mentions that children from poor families are exposed to stress, violence and impaired parenting, leading to inadequate emotional, social and cognitive development which results in low school readiness levels.

Farver, Xu, Eppe and Lonigan (2006:196-197) point out that economic disadvantage leads to a number of stress factors that have a negative impact on the well-being of families and state that low-income families have limited access to resources and are likely to experience higher stress levels which will negatively affect their children's school readiness. According to Magnuson and Shager (2010:1187) economic hardship causes parents to feel frustrated, helpless and depressed, which may lead

to harsh and punitive parenting styles, which imply less responsiveness to their children's needs. Similarly Farver et al. (2006:198-199) found that low income parents are less sensitive to their children and may be more irritable and critical. This leads to more difficult behaviour in the children and causes negative parent-child interactions. They continue by stating that these parents are less likely to provide an environment at home that can support their children in developing school readiness skills. Mistry et al. (2012:445-446) argue that especially mothers of low income families tend to be less warm and responsive, unable to maintain consistency in discipline or to establish emotional secure relationships with their children. This statement is confirmed by Chazan-Cohen et al.² (2009:960) when stating that maternal depression and parental stress have a negative impact on children's development and well-being, leading to lower levels of learning readiness at school entry.

Another factor concerning low income families which is directly related to the children's levels of school readiness, is family size and by implication the number of siblings. Al-Hassan and Lansford (2009:218) mention that more siblings imply that the parents' energy and time, as well as the resources available to support child development have to be shared, which means that the individual child receives less parental attention that can support school readiness, for example individual interaction with the parent that can foster language acquisition and cognitive development. In this regard Farver et al. (2006:197) state that children from large families in disadvantaged communities tend to have lower vocabulary counts, impaired cognitive abilities and restricted social functioning. According to them high density living conditions have been associated with a lower quality of parent to child speech.

According to Azzi-Lessing (2010:2) the lack of resources in low income families, including nutritious food and educational toys, will compromise the development of the young child. Chazan-Cohen et al. (2009:961) point out that poor families are unable to provide their children with stimulating experiences and materials to support learning. This leads to lower levels of cognitive development and insufficient school readiness. Similarly Al-Hassan and Lansford (2009:218) mention that families with restricted financial resources are unable to provide enriching experiences to their

²Chazan-Cohen, Raikes, Brooks-Gunn, Ayoub, Pan, Kisker, Roggman and Fuligni.

children, engage in their children's education or foster academic success. With regard to children from low income families, Magnuson et al. (2007:49) mention that these children often do not have access to books, their parents usually do not read to them and verbal interactions between them and their parents are limited. Magnuson and Shager (2010:1187) came to the conclusion that children from poor families face considerable disadvantages. The more risks the family faces, the greater the gap will be between the level of school readiness these children have reached and the level of school readiness that is expected from them at the time of school entry (Farver et al. 2006:196).

Exploring the effect of poor communities on school readiness, Al-Hassan and Lansford (2009:218) point out that children from rural areas may be less ready for school than their peers who live in urban areas due to the fact that the poor communities they live in provide a less stimulating environment without the qualities needed to foster school readiness. Lapointe et al. (2007:474) state that unemployment, single parent families, immigrants and unsafe neighbourhoods all affect child development negatively. Azzi-Lessing (2010:3-4) refers to this issue by stating that violence, inadequate housing and social isolation further intensify the stress low income families experience as well as the trauma the children are exposed to and emphasises the fact that children from such families are often at risk of child abuse, neglect or other forms of trauma, which will jeopardise all aspects of their development.

2.4.2 THE GAP IN SCHOOL READINESS BETWEEN LEARNERS FROM POOR FAMILIES AND THEIR MORE ADVANTAGED PEERS

The differences in school readiness between children from poor families and their more advantaged peers are stressed by a number of authors of school readiness literature. According to Janus and Duku (2010:398) there is plenty of evidence that children's developmental outcomes are strongly predicted by the family's socio-economic status. Daily, Burkhauser and Halle (2012:21) argue that a significant gap can be detected between the development of low-income children and their more advantaged peers by the time they enter school, including their general health, cognitive development and social-emotional development. Azzi-Lessing (2010:2) found that young children from low income families are more likely to have emotional

and behavioural problems than their peers from more advantaged backgrounds. Children from poor families exhibit lower levels of cognitive development and higher levels of problematic behaviour when compared to their peers (Mistry et al. 2012:445; Chazan-Cohen et al. 2009:961). According to various authors, these differences between children from economically disadvantaged families and their more advantaged peers persist in later school years. Magnuson and Shager (2010:1186) confirm that differences in school readiness often predict an inequality in academic performance that is likely to increase during the early school years. Daily et al. (2012:21) state that it is “unlikely that these gaps can be closed later through schooling alone.”

Taking a closer look at the school situation where both economically disadvantaged children and more advantaged children enter Grade 1, we find that teachers have to deal with a variety of school readiness levels, since each child enters Grade 1 with his/her own skills, strengths, weaknesses and needs (Daily et al. 2012:21). Azzi-Lessing (2010:4) states that many schools lack the resources which are necessary to support their learners and are easily overwhelmed by the demands of highly vulnerable children and their families. She points out that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are often traumatised and might enter the formal learning environment with challenging behaviour, including aggressiveness which disrupts the learning process, overwhelms the teacher and adds to the stress of teachers who are already under a lot of pressure to meet the diverse needs of their learners.

The effect of poverty and deprivation on school readiness through the lens of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory of child development is presented in Figure 2.6.

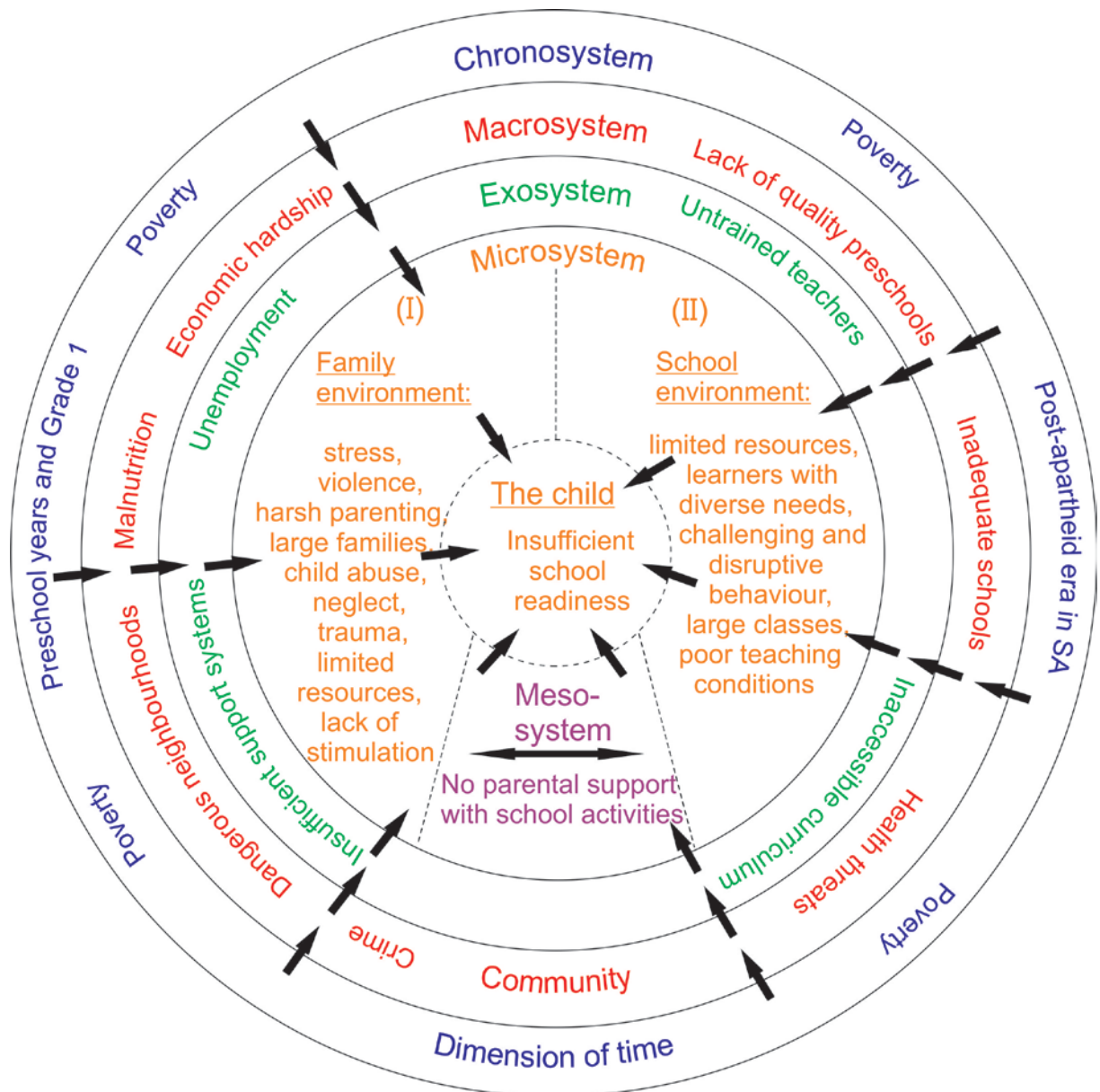


Figure 2.6: The effect of poverty and deprivation on school readiness through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory of child development

School readiness is essential in order for the formal teaching and learning process in Grade 1 to be successful. As pointed out earlier, school readiness can be defined as the readiness of the community to support the learner, the readiness of the school to meet the needs of the learner, as well as the personal readiness of the learner for formal learning.

For the purpose of this study the focus will now be moved to the personal readiness of the learner, and more specifically the criteria for the personal school readiness of the learner.

2.5 CRITERIA FOR THE PERSONAL SCHOOL READINESS OF THE LEARNER

Pagani et al. (2010:985) refer to the findings of a study conducted by Duncan et al. exploring the different aspects of school readiness and the effect thereof on later academic achievement, when stating that regulation of attention and early mathematics and literacy skills predicted better achievement in the early grades. According to Duncan et al. social skills and regulation of behaviour were apparently found not to have a significant influence on academic progress, even among children with socio-emotional problems. Apparently the findings of this study proved that early skills in mathematics was the most powerful predictor of academic progress, followed by literacy skills and in the third place, the ability to pay attention (Pagani et al. 2010:985).

However, as pointed out before, the personal school readiness of the learner at school entry entails more than just academic skills. Magnuson et al. (2004:143) point out that motivation, behaviour and eagerness to learn all contribute to academic success. Similarly Janus and Duku (2010:376) argue that although children start the formal learning process in Grade 1 with specific academic skills, their ability to apply these skills in learning is essential for their overall progress. They emphasise that non-cognitive skills are therefore just as important as cognitive skills. According to these authors non-cognitive skills include the ability to adapt, ask questions, cooperate with peers, respect people and property, as well as physical skills, independence, and effective communication skills (Janus & Duku, 2010:376).

Barbarin, Early, Clifford, Brayant, Frome, Burchinal, Howes and Pianta (2008:675) found that teachers tend to put more emphasis on the non-cognitive skills when asked which skills they regard as the most important for successful learning in the early grades of formal schooling. According to teachers the progress of their learners is negatively influenced by aspects such as sleepiness, restlessness, insufficient oral communication skills, a lack of motivation and poor social skills, rather than insufficient early literacy and mathematics skills (Barbarin et al. 2008:675). Teachers view the personal readiness of learners in terms of attitude towards learning, behaviour and the skills needed to meet the social demands of the formal learning environment as essential for formal learning, while communication skills and good health are also regarded as important for school readiness. Barbarin et al. (2008:675)

refer to a national survey reflecting teachers' perceptions of criteria for the personal school readiness of learners at school entry and mention the following aspects that were included in their responses: oral communication skills (84%); curiosity and enthusiasm (76%); behaviour regulation and the ability to follow instructions (60%); and emotional sensitivity (58%), while early literacy skills were mentioned by only 10% and early math skills by only 7% percent of the teachers (Barbarin et al. 2008:675).

The “five dimensions of children’s readiness resources” namely physical well-being and motor development; social-emotional development; approaches to learning; language usage and communication skills; and cognitive skills and general knowledge mentioned by Piotrkowski et al. (2001:540) and referred to as the five “major skill areas” by Roberts et al. (2011:117) were proposed as the criteria for the personal readiness of the learner at school entry by the National Education Goals Panel (NGEP, 1991), based on the findings of research on children’s development (Barbarin et al. 2008:674) and include both cognitive and non-cognitive skills (see Figure 2.4: Children’s personal school readiness resources).

The above mentioned five dimensions or skill areas of children’s personal school readiness cannot be separated, since there are a number of ‘grey areas’ where overlapping occurs, for example the connection between language and social-emotional development, as pointed out by Bierman³ (2008:1813) when stating that language proficiency enhance the learner’s ability to regulate his/her emotions and promote successful social interaction, while social-emotional competency leads to stronger relationships, creating opportunities for language and cognitive development. Liew (2012:105) mentions that cognitive skills are needed for motivation, to adapt socially and to regulate own emotions and behaviour. He points out the relevance of this statement for school readiness when claiming that –

children who are unable to pay attention or control their behaviour are likely to experience difficulties with peers and teachers, whereas those who exhibit good effortful control skills tend to exhibit social competence and low problem behaviours (Liew, 2012:106).

Despite the fact that the criteria for the personal school readiness of the learner are developmentally intertwined, the different areas of development will be discussed

³Bierman, Domitrovich, Nix, Gest, Welsh, Greenberg, Blair, Nelson and Gill.

separately, with reference to the specific skills expected from the Grade 1 learner, the effect of poverty on those skills, the impact thereof on the learning process and the responsibility of the Grade 1 teacher in supporting the learner in that regard.

2.5.1 PHYSICAL WELL-BEING AND MOTOR DEVELOPMENT

2.5.1.1 Expectations regarding the physical development of the Grade 1 learner

Physical well-being as the first criterion for the personal school readiness of the Grade 1 learner includes physical health and fitness, adequate energy levels for classroom and playground activities, as well as daily living skills and the ability to take care of own needs (Barbarin et al. 2008:674; Janus & Duku, 2010:383-384). In conducting a study on insufficient school readiness of Grade 1 learners due to sleep disturbances, Ravid, Afek, Suraiya, Shahar and Pillar (2009:819-821) found a strong relationship between nocturnal sleep problems and insufficient school readiness. They claim that these children suffer from low energy levels, a shortened attention span and a tendency to fall asleep during class time as well as mood swings, oppositional behaviour and a lack of motivation. Sleepiness in class also affects emotional stability and cognitive functioning which are essential for learning (Ravid et al. 2008:819-821). As far as physical health is concerned Janus and Duku (2010:394-395) argue that children from low income families are more than twice as vulnerable at school entry as their more advantaged peers, due to suboptimal health which contributes to a gap in school readiness when compared to healthy children.

Motor development include gross motor skills, fine motor skills, motor coordination and visual-motor skills (Pagani et al. 2010:987; Roberts et al. 2011:117). According to Grissmer, Grimm, Aiyer, Murrah and Steele (2010:1014-1015) young children learn as they explore their world and continually adapt and change their movements in response to their environment. They explain that newly developed motor skills create opportunities for mastering more complex cognitive skills as children experience more challenges in their environment. Playing is essential in this process of development as young children master sensory-motor skills through play. Sherry and Draper (2012:13) explain that their desire to play motivate children to move around and explore their environment, which provides the practice they need to master motor and coordination skills. They claim that significant relationships can be

found between play activities and the motor skills needed for school readiness. In this regard Grissmer et al. (2010:1014-1015) state that by the time children enter Grade 1 they should have developed sufficient cognitive skills to initiate learning through the process of motor development.

Similarly Piek, Dawson, Smith and Gasson (2007: 669) point out that motor development can be seen as a prerequisite for perceptual and cognitive abilities. These authors refer to Piaget (1953) stating that sensory-motor experience is important for cognitive development and claim that early gross motor development has a significant impact on the cognitive functioning of the learner at school entry, especially as far as processing speed and working memory are concerned (Piek et al. 2007:680). Pienaar, Van Rensburg and Smit (2011:113-114) also confirm that motor development and cognitive development are fundamentally interrelated and continue by pointing out that perceptual development is in turn interrelated to motor development, since voluntary movements result from perceptual awareness based on sensory stimulation. Van Zyl (2004:148) explains that perception is “the ability of the brain to make contact, via the senses, with the outside world” and that it “includes receiving and organising the information and any reaction to the information.” Pienaar et al. (2011:114) claim that good perceptual-motor development is required by the time a child enters the school system in order to be ready for formal learning.

2.5.1.2 The effect of insufficient physical and motor development on formal learning

Sherry and Draper (2012:12) argue that all aspects of formal learning are based on sufficient physical skills and that a lack thereof could lead to poor academic progress as well as social and behavioural problems. Disadvantaged children have fewer opportunities to develop physical skills than more advantaged children, because activities that offer such opportunities are often not possible due to a lack of materials, toys and the physical space needed for gross motor activities (Grissmer et al. 2010:1016; Sherry & Draper, 2012:12-13). Van Biljon and Longhurst (2011:442) stress the fact that children with poorly developed gross motor skills find it difficult to cope with classroom activities such as writing, sitting up and being alert. These authors found that many parents and even teachers assume that motor skills develop automatically as the child matures. This assumption may exist due to a lack of

knowledge concerning child development and indicates the necessity of an effective intervention programme for young children offered by the school (Van Biljon & Longhurst, 2011:442).

2.5.1.3 The role and responsibility of the teacher

Pienaar et al. (2011:114) argue that a well compiled movement programme is necessary for good motor development, sensory integration and perceptual development in pre-school children, which are essential components of learning readiness at school entry. Shelly and Draper (2012:13-14) also suggest a well-structured weekly programme with gross motor and play activities, but stress the fact that for the intervention to be successful, the teachers need to be well trained to implement such a programme.

2.5.2 EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING AND SOCIAL COMPETENCE

Emotional well-being and social competence as the second criterion for the personal school readiness of the Grade 1 learner features prominently in the school readiness literature, indicating the importance thereof. According to Roberts et al. (2011:117) the abilities included within this criterion are essential for a successful transition from the informal preschool setting to the structured setting of formal teaching and learning in Grade 1 which is characterised by routine and rules. Bulotsky-Shearer, Fantuzzo and McDermott (2008:5) mention some important social demands of the classroom environment which include social expectations by the teacher and the peers, classroom rules that need to be obeyed and the forming of friendships. Farver et al. (2006:207) argue that the social and emotional functioning of the learner at school entrance, including the ability to cooperate, communicate effectively and follow directions, as well as an age-appropriate awareness and knowledge of emotions, is necessary for successful social-emotional adjustment in Grade 1.

2.5.2.1 Expectations regarding the social-emotional development of the Grade 1 learner

The emotional well-being of the school beginner includes the ability to deal with, regulate and appropriately express own emotions, think before acting, as well as the ability to respond appropriately to the feelings of others (Barbarin et al. 2008:674;

Janus & Duku, 2010:383-384). Regulating own emotions imply that the learner should be able to control aggressive behaviour, remain seated when expected to and not disrupt the learning process in the class (Bierman et al. 2008:1803; Romano, Babchishin, Pagani & Kohen, 2010:1005). Van Zyl (2004:151) adds that the Grade 1 learner should also be able to function independently and be self-reliant. The Grade 1 classroom setting is characterised by an increased emphasis on independent functioning together with decreased supervision and support, due to the teacher-learner ratio when compared to the informal pre-school – or home environment (Graziano, Reavis, Keane & Calkins 2007:4). According to these authors the demands Grade 1 learners face such as acquiring new academic and interpersonal skills, are challenging and often lead to feelings of fear and anxiety. They point out that an inability to control these emotions might negatively affect cognitive functioning in a direct way by limiting the child's ability to pay attention or indirectly by causing disruptive behaviour (Graziano et al. 2007:5).

Janus and Duku (2010:383-384) define the social competency expected from the Grade 1 learner as the ability to obey rules, accept and respect authority, cooperate with others, play and work with peers, act appropriately in the social context of the classroom and control own behaviour. They also point out that the school beginner should be curious about the world and show an eagerness to learn. Bierman et al. (2008:1803) mention that social behaviour necessary to form positive relationships with teachers and peers, like sharing, taking turns and helping, as well as social problem-solving skills should be part of the school readiness equipment of the learner at school entrance. McClelland and Morrison (2003:207) distinguish between interpersonal skills, namely positive interaction, sharing and respect for others on the one hand and learning-related social skills, namely "independence, responsibility, self-regulation and cooperation" on the other hand.

Farver et al. (2006:198) argue that the social-emotional skills of young children emerge from the home environment and point out that the relationships children have with their parents are transferred and extended to their relationships with their teachers and peers when they enter the school environment. In this regard Andreassen and West (2007:630) state that "via the emotional connection with their caregivers, infants learn skills that will support their transition to the environment outside the home and eventually their transition to school and subsequent academic

achievement.” These skills include awareness of the self and others, the ability to interpret facial expressions and actions, the ability to express and communicate own emotions and self-organisation (Andreassen & West, 2007:630). When parents encourage their children’s autonomy, they strengthen their social competence which is the first step to the social independency needed for a successful school career (Walker & MacPhee, 2011:356).

Numerous authors refer to the link between the social-emotional readiness of the learner at school entrance and academic achievement. Romano et al. (2010:1005) explain that well developed social-emotional skills can empower a learner to ask for assistance from teachers and peers and in doing so get the full benefit of the learning experience, while a lack thereof will reduce the chances of receiving assistance. Lacking social-emotional skills may in fact lead to behaviour that disrupts the learning process, resulting in negative relationships with teachers and peers (Romano et al. 2010:1005). Similarly Duncan et al. (2006:4) refer to inadequate social-emotional skills causing conflict between the learner and the teacher as well as peer rejection and social exclusion, which in turn reduce the learner’s participation in classroom activities and collaborative learning opportunities, negatively affecting academic achievement. According to Sheridan, Knoche, Edwards, Bovaird and Kupzyk (2010:127) learners with sufficient social-emotional competence take part in classroom activities, engage in positive relationships with teachers and peers and enjoy learning, while Walker and MacPhee (2011:356) confirm that insufficient social-emotional development at school entry is longitudinally associated with poor academic outcomes.

Hindman, Skibbe, Miller and Zimmerman (2009:236) refer to a study where teachers indicated children’s social competence, and more specifically the ability to control their own behaviour and attention, cooperate with teachers and peers and learn from and with others, as the most important school readiness resource for children in the early grades. There is no doubt that learners with sufficient social-emotional development will be motivated to learn, will engage in classroom activities and will be able to focus and pay attention, resulting in better academic performance (McClelland & Morrison, 2003:209). Denham and Brown (2010:656) name five “social-emotional learning competencies”, namely “self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, responsible decision making, and relationship/social

skills.” A summary of the five social-emotional learning competencies (SEL) mentioned by Denham and Brown (2010:656-662) is illustrated in Table 2.1, as well as the link of each to the teaching and learning process.

Table 2.1: An adapted summary of the social-emotional learning (SEL) competencies (Denham & Brown, 2010:656)

SEL competencies	Different abilities needed for school readiness	Link with teaching and learning process
Self-awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accurately assess personal feelings, interests, values and strengths; • Identify and label own feelings 	Provides confidence to take risks in the classroom
Self-management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Handle own emotions productively; • Monitor own feelings and modify when necessary; • Handle stress effectively; • Perseverance; • Regulate own social and academic behaviour; • Self-motivation and goal setting 	Ability to remain positively engaged in tasks; Ability to pay attention, work independently, stay focused; Ability to follow directions, complete tasks, concentrate, ask questions and seek help; Enjoys challenges
Social awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respect similarities and differences of others; • Understand the feelings of others; • Empathise with others; • Respect the perspectives of others 	The ability to interpret emotions in context makes the classroom a less confusing and overwhelming place.
Responsible decision making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analyse social situations, identify and solve social problems; • Set social goals; • Solve differences with peers effectively; • Make appropriate ethical decisions that consider and respect others. 	The ability to comply with class rules; The ability to control aggression and disruptive behaviour.
Relationship/social skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish positive, effective and lasting relationships; • Initiate and maintain conversations; 	Successful learning with and from others in the social environment of the Grade 1 classroom.

SEL competencies	Different abilities needed for school readiness	Link with teaching and learning process
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cooperate, listen, take turns, seek help; • Acquire friendship skills, e.g. expressing appreciation, negotiating, giving feedback. 	

2.5.2.2 The effect of insufficient social-emotional development on formal learning

Many children from disadvantaged backgrounds are likely to enter school without the social-emotional skills they need to succeed in school due to the impact of poverty on the home environment (Bierman et al. 2008:1803). According to Bulotsky-Shearer et al. (2008:3) children living in poverty are exposed to malnutrition, isolation, insufficient housing, violence and crime, increasing the risk of emotional and behavioural challenges for these children when they enter school. Sherry and Draper (2012:2) refer to mental disorders of parents, such as depression, that can negatively affect the social-emotional development of the young child, while Sheridan et al. (2010:127) point out that many children from poor families receive inconsistent guidance and less emotional support from their parents, causing them to struggle with classroom tasks requiring social-emotional competence. These children are often deprived from parental warmth, sensitivity, support and participation (Sheridan et al. 2010:128).

Children who are exposed to harsh parenting in the early years of development tend to be aggressive, experience academic difficulties and are rejected by their peers (Walker and MacPhee, 2011:356). These children are less likely to be able to control their own behaviour, leading to disruptive behaviour in the classroom (Walker and MacPhee, 2011:357), which can include defiance, hyperactivity and fighting (Graziano et al. 2007:6). Pears, Fisher and Bronz (2007:666) state that insufficient social-emotional competence can result in a lack of self-regulation, peer-rejection, an inability to concentrate and poor academic performance. Graziano et al. (2007:5-6) argue that teachers are less tolerant with learners who exhibit disruptive and inappropriate behaviour and tend to react more critical towards them.

2.5.2.3 The role and responsibility of the teacher

It is clear that learners from disadvantaged backgrounds often lack the social-emotional readiness needed to function successfully in the formal learning environment, which implies that the class teacher has a very important role to play in supporting these learners through interventions that can strengthen their social-emotional competence (Sheridan et al. 2010:127). Bierman et al. (2008:1804) state that warm support and effective classroom management can promote appropriate behaviour and reduce aggression, while Liew (2012:107-108) points out that supportive teachers can foster independence in learners that can benefit their progress. Similarly Sheridan et al. (2010:148) found that warm, sensitive and supportive relationships between teachers and their learners positively affect the learners' independence and academic achievement. The attitude of the teacher towards the learner is the most important aspect of any intervention (Van Zyl, 2004:150). Teachers can successfully motivate their learners by establishing nurturing relationships where the learner can experience a sense of belonging (Berhenke, Miller, Brown, Seifer & Dickstein, 2011:432). According to Graziano et al. (2007:5) the quality of the teacher-learner relationship is an important aspect in the learner's ability to adapt to the formal school environment. They point out that a close relationship characterised by praise, encouragement, discipline and guidance can be a protective shield for learners at risk of social-emotional difficulty and state that such a relationship will motivate learners to achieve in order to please their teachers (Graziano et al. 2007:6,16).

Vitiello, Moas, Henderson, Greenfield and Munis (2012:302-303) mention another important aspect of the class teacher's responsibility in supporting learners who are vulnerable due to insufficient social-emotional skills, namely to provide a high-quality classroom environment that can counteract the impact of the risk factors these learners are exposed to. In order to achieve this, the teacher needs to adapt the expectations as well as the curriculum according to the diverse needs of the learners, which implies that he/she knows and respects the background of each learner and recognises the strengths, abilities and individual characteristics of each learner (McClelland & Morrison, 2003:220). Vitiello et al. (2012:302) further suggest that classroom instruction should be adapted to meet the needs of individual learners, while Bierman et al. (2008:1804, 1813) suggest that social-emotional development

can be enhanced by presenting lessons on social-emotional skills, using “emotion coaching” and “problem-solving dialogue techniques.”

Sheridan et al. (2010:129) recommend that teachers regard parents as partners in their children’s education, by establishing teacher-parent relationships that can facilitate the social-emotional development of vulnerable children.

2.5.3 APPROACHES TO LEARNING

(H)ow to learn is as important as *what* to learn in preparing children for school. Approaches to learning describe inclinations, dispositions, and styles that influence how children initiate and engage in learning. Approaches can enhance or detract a child’s ability to learn. They also affect what children do with the knowledge and skills they acquire. (Chen, Masur & McNamee, 2011:1137)

Approaches to learning as the third criterion for the personal school readiness of the Grade 1 learner refers to learning-related behaviour that enables the learner to engage in classroom activities and includes motivation, a positive attitude towards learning and the ability to tolerate frustration (Vitiello, Greenfield, Munis & George, 2011:391), as well as “curiosity, initiative, persistence and imagination” (Barbarin et al. 2008:674). Pagani et al. (2010:985) refer to these aspects of school readiness as the classroom working habits of a learner which, together with cognitive skills, determine academic progress and success. They mention the work of McKinney, Mason, Perkerson and Clifford (1975) when stating that approaches to learning such as independence, task orientation and the ability to focus were rated by teachers as essential for academic success.

2.5.3.1 Expectations regarding approaches to learning in Grade 1

Li-Grining et al. (2010:1026) define approaches to learning as the characteristics and behaviours shown by learners while engaging in learning activities, including “persistence, emotion regulation, attentiveness, flexibility and organisation.” The learner’s willingness to accept challenges and intentionally engage in learning tasks can be added to the list (Van Zyl, 2004:151). Learners with positive approaches to learning will be able to willingly choose tasks that are challenging, approach these tasks with a positive attitude and work on it independently, while being able to focus

on the tasks, ignore distractions, tolerate frustration and accept assistance from peers or the teacher when needed (Vitiello et al. 2011:391).

According to Chen et al. (2011:1140) acquiring these much needed approaches to learning does not happen spontaneously, but is based on a maturation process that is essential for learning readiness. They propose that these learning-related behaviours are obtained as children engage in learning activities and react positively to the demands of the formal learning environment of the Grade 1 class. As children comply with the social expectations of the classroom context, they internalise these learning habits as their own (Chen et al. 2011:1141). While engaging in learning activities, learners make use of self-regulation to cooperate with their peers and focus on tasks (Li-Grining et al. 2010:1062-1063). Learners who are able to pay attention while controlling their own behaviour and emotions, will develop positive relationships with their teachers and peers, since it is easier to teach learners who are focused and motivated to learn (Li-Grining et al. 2010:1073). Being able to stay focused for longer, leads to prolonged engagement in learning activities, resulting in better academic achievement (Duncan et al. 2006:19).

2.5.3.2 The role and responsibility of the teacher

Sadly, the opposite is true for many learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. As indicated before, these learners are less likely to be able to control their own emotions and behaviour or to concentrate on learning tasks, resulting in academic failure. From this unfortunate situation emerge the role and responsibility of the Grade 1 teacher to support struggling learners in approaching the learning environment in a more positive way. According to Vitiello et al. (2011:405) the emotional support offered by the class teacher, as well as positive peer relationships in the classroom can have a remarkable effect on the learners' active participation in learning activities. Li-Grining et al. (2010:1065) argue that at-risk learners with a more positive approach to learning will cope better with the challenges they face due to poverty, since they will have more resilience and will benefit more from the learning opportunities that are available to them.

Chen et al. (2011:1141) explain that teachers can shape their learners' approaches to learning through the way they set up the classroom environment, the expectations they have of their learners and the teaching strategies they use. These authors

suggest that teachers instruct their learners about approaches to learning in developmentally appropriate ways, in the same way they teach them about content knowledge and concepts. Young learners need to learn how to engage in learning activities in ways that are most beneficial for learning to take place (Chen et al. 2011:1148).

Ursache, Blair and Raver (2011:123) suggest that self-regulation should be seen as a “bidirectional system linking emotion with cognition.” In this system the cognitive skills of the learner is seen as the top-down, “volitional” (voluntary, intentional) component of self-regulation which is important for motivating the learner to engage in learning activities. The cognitive component is, however, “related to and dependent on the bottom-up, less volitional and more automatic regulation” of emotional responses to the classroom environment which includes rules, routines and teaching strategies. The teacher can support her learners by providing a well structured classroom environment with a set routine, clear rules and teaching strategies that suit the learners’ diverse needs. In doing so, she can assist the learners in regulating their emotions and activating their cognitive abilities. Figure 2.7 represents a possible way to illustrate this bidirectional model of self-regulation.

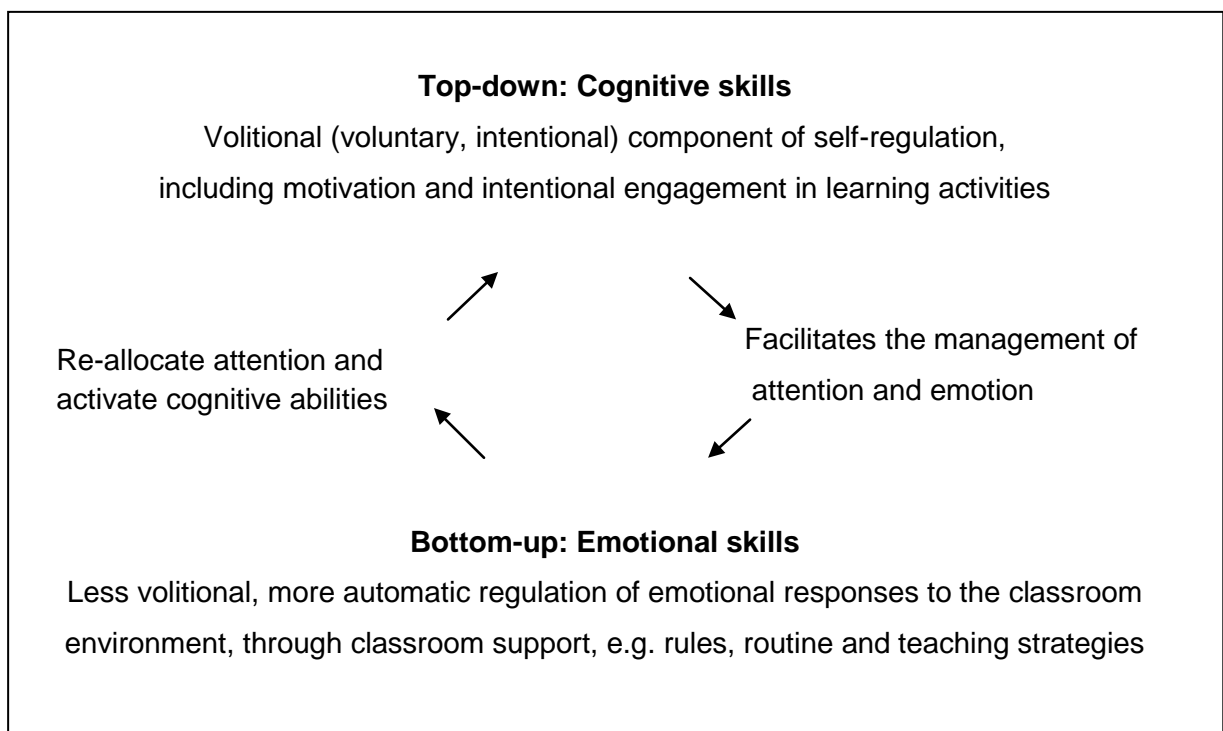


Figure 2.7: Self-regulation as bidirectional system linking emotion and cognition
(Ursache et al. 2012:123-126)

2.5.4 COGNITIVE SKILLS AND GENERAL KNOWLEDGE

According to Janus et al. (2010:383-384) cognitive skills and general knowledge as the fourth criterion for the personal school readiness of the Grade 1 learner refers to age-appropriate reading, writing and numeracy skills as well as age-appropriate knowledge of his/her life world. Bierman, Torres, Domitrovich, Welsh and Gest (2008:309) mention two different aspects of cognitive skills that are important for school readiness. The first aspect consists of the learner's academic knowledge which depends on the quality of preschool instruction he/she was exposed to, as well as his/her ability to acquire new knowledge in the formal learning environment. The second aspect consists of the executive functions, namely working memory, inhibitory control and cognitive flexibility. These executive functions are of critical importance for school readiness and academic achievement in the early grades (Wanless, McClelland, Acock, Chen & Chen, 2011:1; Bierman, Nix, Greenberg, Blair & Domitrovich, 2008:825). The executive functions each play an important role individually as well as collectively in the cognitive functioning of the learner (Wanless et al. 2011:3).

2.5.4.1 Expectations regarding the cognitive development of the Grade 1 learner

Working memory enables the learner to retrieve information from the long term memory, integrate it with newly acquired information and apply it in new situations (Welsh, Nix, Blair, Bierman & Nelson, 2010:3; Diamond, Barnett, Thomas & Munro, 2007:2-3). In the process the newly acquired information is consolidated and stored into the long term memory for future use (Bierman et al. 2008:824-825). Learners with well developed working memory skills will be able to solve problems by following directions (McClelland, Cameron, Connor, Farris, Jewkes & Morrison, 2007:948) and keep instructions in mind while completing learning tasks (Fitzpatrick & Pagani, 2012:210). **Inhibitory control** enables the learner to resist distractions and habits, in order to focus his/her attention on what is needed at a specific time and to control his/her own behaviour according to social expectations (Diamond et al. 2007:2-3). It also fosters self-regulation and will prevent the learner from impulsively responding to stimuli and rather stick to the demands of the learning task (Welsh et al. 2010:3; Bierman et al. 2008:825). **Cognitive flexibility** is the ability to adjust to changes in

demands, to look at a problem from a different perspective and to think creatively (Diamond et al. 2007:2-3). Vitiello et al. (2011:389) argue that learners with stronger cognitive flexibility will be able to select and activate more positive approaches to learning than learners with low cognitive flexibility, resulting in better academic progress.

Welsh et al. (2010:2) argue that executive function skills foster social competence and self-regulation, enabling learners to successfully engage in learning activities with teachers and peers. Similarly Bierman et al. (2008:836-837) state that these cognitive skills enable learners to approach learning in a way that leads to “mutually rewarding relationships with teachers and peers.”

2.5.4.2 The effect of insufficient cognitive development on formal learning

Executive functions develop through biological maturation, but are also influenced by the preschool learning opportunities the learner is exposed to (Roberts et al. 2011:117). For the successful development of these cognitive skills, children need to grow up in an environment characterised by opportunities for exploration under the sensitive and responsive guidance of their parents and/or caretakers (Bierman et al. 2008:823-824). Cognitive development is often delayed when children grow up in environments deprived from stimulating learning opportunities (Welsh et al. 2012:2; Vitiello et al. 2011:389-390), resulting in insufficient self-regulation and an inability to pay attention (Bierman et al. 2008:823-824). These learners are likely to experience problems with adjustment and learning in the formal Grade 1 environment. They may not benefit from the learning opportunities available to them and may also experience the learning process negatively (Bierman et al. 2008:826). Due to feelings of frustration and failure, they withdraw themselves from the classroom activities and become resistant to the school environment (Diamond et al. 2007:18). In addition, McClelland et al. (2007:947) mention that learners without adequate cognitive skills often experience peer rejection, while Diamond et al. (2007:18) point out that their lack of self-regulation may lead to negative responses from teachers.

2.5.4.3 The role and responsibility of the teacher

Wanless et al. (2011:23) suggest that teachers support learners who lack self-regulation skills by providing positive feedback and emotional support, while Bierman

et al. (2008:827) suggest the use of class discussions, questions and retelling of stories to enhance the learners' memory, reasoning and planning skills.

2.5.5 LANGUAGE USAGE AND COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Significant predictors of school readiness ... were evident from two years of age, and were all related to language and pre-literacy factors from two to six years ... The most influential factors in readiness for school were child language competencies and pre-literacy capacities, including phonemic awareness and letter knowledge (Prior, Bavin & Ong, 2011:3).

Language usage and communication skills as the fifth criterion for the personal school readiness of the Grade 1 learner may well be the most important of all the criteria mentioned and the toughest barrier to overcome for many learners from disadvantaged backgrounds and second language learners. Well-developed communication skills in the language of instruction, including a rich vocabulary and the ability to express thoughts fluently, as well as phonemic awareness and knowledge of literacy concepts are essential for successful learning in Grade 1 (Lessing & De Witt, 2005:245; Castro, Paez, Dickinson & Frede, 2011:16; Prior et al. 2011:14).

2.5.5.1 Expectations regarding the language development of the Grade 1 learner

Roberts et al. (2011:117) point out that the young learner needs to understand the content presented to him/her and be able to communicate effectively with his/her teacher and peers. The ability to comprehend oral instruction in the classroom and organise knowledge depend on well-developed oral language skills (Bierman et al. 2008:1804; Hindman et al. 2009:236). The importance of proficiency in language usage and communication skills for successful learning has been proven in numerous studies. Well-developed language skills will enable the learner to understand the social demands of the formal learning environment and express his/her own socio-emotional needs (Bierman et al. 2008:1804). Success in formal reading instruction depends on phonological awareness, print knowledge and oral language skills (Bierman et al. 2008:1804-1805), since word decoding and reading comprehension are fostered by a rich vocabulary and oral language competence

(Castro et al. 2011:15-16; Lessing et al, 2005:246). Hindman et al. (2009:236) state that learners with insufficient language skills are likely to struggle with both reading and mathematics, while Rowe, Raudenbush and Goldin-Meadow (2012:508) argue that school success is predicted by children's language skills.

In order to acquire well developed communication and literacy skills children need warm, responsive relationships with their parents and caregivers in the pre-school years (Bierman et al. 2008:1804; Farver et al. 2006:199). Chazan-Cohen et al. (2009:971-972) confirm that supportive parenting results in better language skills at school entry. In homes where parents talk to their children, read to them and provide a variety of reading materials, opportunities for conversations are created, leading to well developed communication skills which include high receptive and expressive vocabulary scores (Farver et al. 2006:198; Han et al. 2012:772). According to Cristofaro and Tamis-LeMonda (2011:88) children are exposed to rich vocabulary and are prompted to answer questions in their daily experiences and conversations with their parents. Van Zyl (2004:151) points out that parents who read to their children create an enjoyable social environment and foster a love for reading by the example they set. Learners who were read to from an early age, show more interest in books and reading instruction in the classroom (Farver et al. 2006:199), while early exposure to print contributes to success in reading and writing (Mistry et al. 2012:434; Lessing et al. 2005:245). In addition to the above mentioned opportunities parents create for language development of their children, the parents' own reading habits, the quality of their reading material and their enjoyment of reading influence their children's future reading skills (Farver et al. 2006:198).

2.5.5.2 The effect of insufficient language development on formal learning

Many children growing up in poverty do not have such educational opportunities in their home environments. They are often deprived from warm, responsive parental interaction, daily conversations, interactive reading or reading material, putting them at risk of slow language development and limited communication skills at the time they enter school (Bierman et al. 2008:1804; Cristofaro & Tamis-LeMonda, 2011:84; Hindman & Wasik, 2008:480). Magnuson et al. (2004:117) explain that parents from disadvantaged backgrounds use lower quantity and quality of speech leading to slow vocabulary growth in children. By the age of three these children have vocabulary

scores half the size of those of their more advantaged peers (Magnuson et al. 2004:117; Chazan-Cohen et al. 2009:962). Schechter and Bye (2006:138) argue that this gap in vocabulary grows wider with age resulting in limited receptive and expressive vocabulary at school entry, which in turn leads to difficulties with reading comprehension in higher grades. Similarly Prior et al. (2011:14) state that learners starting school with poorly developed language and communication skills are at serious risk of long-term academic and social difficulties. According to Bierman et al. (2008:1804) learners with poorly developed language usage and communication skills rarely catch up with their peers and often suffer “life-long reading disabilities and under achievement.”

2.5.5.3 The role and responsibility of the teacher

When supporting learners with insufficient language usage and communication skills, the teacher should provide a rich language environment and focus on the improvement of oral language skills (Castro et al. 2011:16). Hindman and Wasik (2008:479) agree that teachers play a vital role in creating opportunities for “high-quality language and literacy experiences.” Language development is enhanced by reading stories to learners on a daily basis in the classroom and asking questions about the stories (Lessing & De Witt, 2005:246). In doing so, opportunities for both hearing and using new vocabulary are created. Bierman et al. (2008:1805) suggest regular interactive book reading, followed by rich conversations in order to promote the learners’ oral comprehension skills. Interactive dialogues where the teacher asks a variety of open-ended questions and expands on the learners’ answers, also proved to be successful (Cristofaro & Tamis-LeMonda, 2011:70). Asking Wh-questions (e.g. What? Where? Why?) is more challenging than yes/no questions and encourages the learners to recall and organise information (Cristofaro & Tamis-LeMonda, 2011:71). Knowing what is expected of school beginners regarding language usage and communication skills is important before the teacher can start with formal instruction (Lessing & De Witt, 2005:242).

2.6 CONCLUSION

While reviewing the literature on school readiness, it became evident how important the transition from the informal to the formal learning environment in Grade 1 is and

that the readiness of the Grade 1 child for formal learning should not be underestimated. The Grade 1 teacher has a very important role to play in this transition, especially concerning the learners who enter school without the essential school readiness skills. As numerous studies have proven, poverty has a devastating effect on the family and the development of the child during the preschool years. The socio-ecological model of Bronfenbrenner is a useful framework in providing a holistic picture of the life world of the school beginner. Focussing on economic hardship during the post-apartheid era in South Africa (chronosystem) provides a good understanding of the effect of poverty and deprivation on the different ecological systems which influence early child development directly as well as indirectly. Since the purpose of this study is to explore the effect of insufficient school readiness on the learning process in Grade 1 through the eyes of the Grade 1 teacher, the focus will be on the personal school readiness of the child, the support he/she receives from the family and the situation in the classroom (microsystem), as well as the collaboration between the teacher and the parents (mesosystem).

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CHAPTER 3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In Chapter 2 the importance of school readiness for successful learning was indicated and the multidimensional construct thereof was investigated, with specific focus on the personal readiness of the learner when entering the formal learning environment in Grade 1. The Ecological Theory of Bronfenbrenner was used as theoretical framework to explain how the different contextual factors in the life-world of the learner influence his or her development during the preschool years. Specific mentioning was made of the effect of poverty on the school readiness of learners from disadvantaged backgrounds and the role and responsibility of the Grade 1 teacher in supporting these learners. In this chapter I will explain the research methodology that I have used to explore the effect of insufficient school readiness on learning in Grade 1 through the eyes of the class teachers and the methods I intend to use in making sense of their experiences and concerns regarding this issue. The ethical considerations will also be discussed

3.2 RESEARCH APPROACH

Since the purpose of my study is to explore the effect of insufficient school readiness on learning in Grade 1 through the eyes of the class teacher, I chose to make use of a qualitative approach which will enable me to develop an in-depth understanding of this phenomenon (Creswell, 2008:213). In a qualitative study a single phenomenon of interest is explored and the purpose of the study is stated as an open ended investigation in order for the researcher to learn as much as possible from the participants (Creswell, 2008:55). According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005:3) following a qualitative approach places the researcher in the world as an observer, while making the world visible for interpretation through representations such as interviews and conversations. This means that qualitative researchers follow “an interpretive, naturalistic approach” when attempting to understand a phenomenon in the way their participants give meaning to it (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005:213). As Nieuwenhuis

(2007:51) explains, the researcher interacts with and observes the participants in their natural setting, focussing on their way of understanding a phenomenon, and in doing so gains in-depth knowledge of the meaning that the phenomenon has for the participants. Through conducting focus group interviews with the Grade 1 teachers at the selected schools, I had the opportunity to enquire about their views regarding the school readiness levels of their learners and I could gather first-hand information about their experiences and concerns regarding the issue under investigation. In a qualitative study the ideal is to collect data in the natural setting where people live and work (Creswell, 2008:51). At both schools I was invited into the Grade 1 classrooms which gave me the opportunity to observe the phenomenon in its natural setting.

Creswell (2008:46) also defines qualitative research as “a type of educational research in which the researcher relies on the views of participants; asks broad, general questions; collects data consisting largely of words (or text) from participants; describes and analyzes these words for themes; and conducts the inquiry in a subjective, biased manner.” Through conducting semi-structured focus group interviews, my participants had the opportunity to respond to the questions freely, providing me with rich narratives about their experiences and views regarding the effect of insufficient school readiness on learning in Grade 1.

McMillan and Schumacher (2010:321-324) mention nine key characteristics of qualitative research which are typically found in most qualitative studies. In Table 3.1 I indicate how these characteristics feature in my study.

Table 3.1: Key Characteristics of Qualitative Research (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010:321-324) **and the application thereof to this study**

Characteristic	How it features in this study
Behaviour is studied as it occurs in natural settings .	Data was collected at research sites chosen by the participants, namely their own Grade 1 classrooms .
Context sensitivity is needed in order to interpret behaviour.	The ecological theory of Bronfenbrenner was used to explain the direct and indirect influence of different contexts on the school readiness of Grade 1 learners.

Characteristic	How it features in this study
Researchers collect data directly from the source through direct interaction with participants.	Data was collected through conducting focus group interviews with Grade 1 teachers at selected schools.
Rich narrative descriptions are necessary for an in-depth understanding of a complex phenomenon.	Focus group interviews were recorded and transcribed and in doing so a detailed analysis is made possible.
Process orientation – researchers focus on the <i>how</i> and <i>why</i> of behaviour and not just on the outcomes.	The focus of this study will be on how insufficient school readiness affects teaching and learning in a Grade 1 class, as experienced by the class teachers.
An inductive data analysis enables the researcher to work through the data progressively and generate a new understanding of the phenomenon.	The aim of my data analysis will be to gain a holistic picture and an in-depth understanding of the impact of insufficient school readiness on teaching and learning in Grade 1.
Researchers use the perspectives of their participants to reconstruct reality.	The purpose of my study is to explore the impact of insufficient school readiness on learning in Grade 1 through the eyes of the class teachers .
Emergent design – changes in the research design might be necessary after the data have been collected.	I intend to keep an open mind when analysing my data, since it might be necessary to make changes retrospectively .
Understanding and explanation of a complex phenomenon need to be equally complex in order to capture its true meaning.	Since school readiness is a multi-dimensional construct with many different facets, a detailed explanation will be necessary to understand it and I realise that it is impossible to “account for all of the complexity” (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006:324) of this phenomenon.

Since the purpose of my study is to gain an in-depth understanding of how Grade 1 teachers experience the effect of insufficient school readiness on the teaching and learning that take place in their classrooms, I will proceed from an interpretivist perspective. According to Nieuwenhuis (2007:59) interpretive studies attempt to generate an understanding of the phenomenon under investigation by analysing the meanings given to it by the participants of the study. Similarly McGettigan et al (2012:17) mention that such studies seek to understand reality through the experiences and perspectives of the participants (see section 3.5.1 for a detailed discussion.)

3.3 RESEARCH DESIGN

Case study research means “conducting an empirical investigation of a contemporary phenomenon within its natural context using multiple sources of evidence” (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006:15). Nieuwenhuis (2007) quotes Bromley (1990) when defining a case study as a “systematic inquiry into an event or a set of related events which aims to describe and explain the phenomenon of interest” and states that from an interpretivist point of view, a case study aims to reach an in-depth understanding of how participants in a specific case make meaning of the phenomenon under investigation (Nieuwenhuis, 2007:75). Hancock and Algozzine (2006:15) point out that case study research addresses a phenomenon by focussing on one or more cases that represent a group. In this study I focused on the Grade 1 classrooms of two selected inner city schools to investigate the issue of school readiness. I chose to conduct a case study, because I believe it is the most suitable research design through which I can collect the data I need that will lead me to an in-depth understanding of the effect of insufficient school readiness on teaching and learning in a Grade 1 class. I am aware of the limitations of a case study namely that the selected sample/s cannot be seen as representative of the entire population (Nieuwenhuis, 2007:76). Since the purpose of my study is not to generalise my findings and conclusions, but rather to better understand the issue of insufficient school readiness, I am satisfied that this research design will enable me to reach my goal.

As pointed out in Chapter 1, a multiple instrumental case study (or collective case study) entails that two or more cases are studied, described and compared in order to provide insight into a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2008:477; McMillan & Schumacher, 2010:345). The researcher in a multiple instrumental case study is interested in a certain phenomenon and identifies specific cases as opportunities to study the phenomenon, in other words these specific cases are examined with the aim of gaining insight into the larger issue under investigation (Stake, 2005:445, 451). The cases are of secondary interest and play a supportive role in facilitating the researcher’s understanding of the phenomenon (Stake, 2005:445). For the purpose of this study two inner city primary schools were identified and studied as such.

According to Stake (2005) it is typical for researchers of a qualitative case study to spend a large amount of time on the research site in personal contact with the

participants, in order to observe, reflect on and describe the phenomenon under investigation (Stake, 2005:450). Due to the exploratory nature of case study research, it is necessary to collect information from multiple sources, for example observation, interviews and document analysis which means the researcher is required to spend more time in the research environment (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006:16). To collect the data I needed, I conducted focus group interviews with the Grade 1 teachers at the selected schools.

Case study research is characterised by rich descriptions of the cases investigated. By making use of narratives from transcribed interviews and observations, as well as quotes of participants, the researcher can create mental images of the phenomenon being studied and in doing so bring the complexity thereof to life (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006:16). Since the phenomenon is studied in its natural context, a thorough description of the context is necessary in order to gain a full understanding of the issue at hand. Through analysing and describing my data, I will attempt to create a detailed picture of the effect of insufficient school readiness on the daily events in a Grade 1 classroom.

Nieuwenhuis (2007:75) points out that case study research “opens the possibility of giving a voice to the powerless and voiceless, like children ...” I strongly believe that the traumatic effect on the Grade 1 learner when entering a learning environment without being ready for the demands thereof, should be made known. Since Grade 1 children in such a situation are not able to voice their needs, the voices of their teachers should be heard on their behalf. Conducting this case study will enable me to do so.

3.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

A qualitative study is guided by a primary or central research question as well as secondary or sub questions. According to Creswell (2008) a good primary research question narrows down the purpose of the study and helps the researcher to focus on the phenomenon of interest, but at the same time this question should be general and open-ended so as to provide for the exploratory nature of a qualitative study (Creswell, 2008:143-144). Jansen (2007:3) points out that a good research question will also direct the researcher to appropriate literature and keep him/her focused during the process of data collection.

Jansen (2007:12) explains that the secondary research questions are more specific and should add to the focus of the primary research question. He also indicates that there should be progression in the sequence of the questions from basic to more advanced information (Jansen, 2007:12). Similarly Creswell states that the primary research question is refined by the secondary questions, resulting in a clear focus for the study (Creswell, 2008:145). I used the following research questions to guide my study on the issue of school readiness:

3.4.1 PRIMARY RESEARCH QUESTION

How do Grade 1 teachers experience the impact of insufficient school readiness on teaching and learning in their classrooms and what are their concerns regarding this issue?

3.4.2 SECONDARY RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What are the criteria for school readiness according to the literature on school readiness?
- How do teachers experience the school readiness of their learners when they enter Grade1?
- What do Grade 1 teachers regard as important causes of insufficient school readiness?
- What are Grade 1 teachers' perceptions about the impact of insufficient school readiness on the teaching and learning process in their classes?
- How do Grade 1 teachers understand and perceive their role and responsibility in supporting learners with insufficient school readiness?
- How do Grade 1 teachers experience the implementation of the curriculum with regard to learners with insufficient school readiness?

3.5 RESEARCH CONTEXT

3.5.1 INTERPRETIVE PARADIGM

Nieuwenhuis (2007) defines a paradigm as “a set of assumptions or beliefs about fundamental aspects of reality which gives rise to a particular world-view ...” and continues to explain that these assumptions include our beliefs about reality

(ontology) and epistemology, as well as methodologies (Nieuwenhuis, 2007:47-48). Denzin and Lincoln (2005) cite Guba (1990:17) when stating that a paradigm is “a basic set of beliefs that guides action” and claim that all research is guided by the paradigm or world-view of the researcher, in other words a study is conducted according to how the researcher sees the world, thinks about it and beliefs it should be studied (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005:22). Similarly Nieuwenhuis (2007:48) states that research cannot be separated from the beliefs of the researcher, since the latter determine the way the researcher interprets reality. This made me realise that my own experience as a foundation phase teacher definitely played an important role in my investigation of insufficient school readiness and the effect it has on learning in Grade 1. It influenced the way I collected my data, the questions I asked as well as my interpretation thereof and the conclusions I will eventually come to.

Interpretivist researchers attempt to understand a phenomenon of interest through the eyes of their participants, and therefore analyse the meanings assigned to the phenomenon by the participants (Nieuwenhuis, 2007:59). Denzin and Lincoln (2005), point out that an interpretivist paradigm makes specific demands on the researcher in terms of questions asked and the interpretation of the responses (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005:22). By looking at insufficient school readiness from an interpretivist perspective, I will attempt to gain an in-depth understanding of how Grade 1 teachers experience the influence thereof on teaching and learning in their classrooms. Table 3.2 reflects the assumptions on which an interpretivist perspective is based according to Nieuwenhuis (2007:59-60) and the way these assumptions feature in this study.

Table 3.2: Assumptions of an interpretivist perspective (Nieuwenhuis, 2007:59-60) **and the application thereof to this study**

Assumptions of an interpretivist perspective	How it features in this study
“Human life can only be understood from within”, therefore we study the subjective experiences and interpretations of people and their interaction with their social environment.	Through semi-structured focus group interviews, I created an opportunity for my participants to share their experiences and understandings of the effect of insufficient school readiness on their daily teaching.
“Social life is a distinctively human product” and the meaning people give to a certain phenomenon is linked to the unique context thereof.	The contexts in which the phenomenon of insufficient school readiness is embedded play an important role in how it is interpreted. Both the pre-school environment where the causes of

Assumptions of an interpretivist perspective	How it features in this study
	insufficient school readiness feature, as well as the classroom environment where the effect of insufficient school readiness feature, need to be considered.
“The human mind is the purposive source or origin of meaning.” Exploring the complexity of a phenomenon, leads to a better understanding of the meaning it has for people.	Through an in-depth literature study, the complexity of school readiness was revealed, enabling me to have a more holistic view and a clearer understanding of the challenges faced by my participants.
“Human behaviour is affected by knowledge of the social world.” Understanding more about reality enriches our conceptual framework and provides a link between the concrete world and the abstract theory.	The empirical part of my study provided me with opportunities to meet my participants face to face and engage in conversations with them, resulting in a better understanding of the issue under investigation and bringing the theoretical part of the study to life.
“The social world does not ‘exist’ independently of human knowledge.” Our prior knowledge, values, beliefs and intuition influences the way we understand reality.	My prior teaching experience and the knowledge I gained through reading about recent school readiness studies, provided the lens through which I conducted my own investigation on insufficient school readiness and guides my understanding of the issue.

Nieuwenhuis (2007:60) points out that the strength of an interpretivist perspective lies in the rich descriptions it provides of the phenomenon being investigated, but at the same time the findings of such a study are limited to the specific research context and cannot be generalised beyond the boundaries of the study.

3.5.2 THE ROLE OF THE RESEARCHER

As a qualitative researcher you form a collaborative partnership with your participants in order to collect the data you need and then analyse the data to come to a better understanding of the phenomenon you are investigating (Maree & Van der Westhuizen, 2007:41). Apart from this, you also need to observe, ask questions, probe and interpret what you see and hear in order to fully understand the complexity of your findings. The following functions of a researcher’s role mentioned by Maree and Van der Westhuizen (2007:41) apply to this study, namely preparing and facilitating focus group interviews, analysing the data and interpreting the data.

McMillan and Schumacher (2010:348) point out that a qualitative study is usually conducted in the field, which means that the natural setting where the participants

live and work is chosen as the research site. The role of the researcher is established by the position of the researcher, as well as his/her relationship with the participants. In a case where the researcher enters the research site as a complete outsider, he/she will not be involved in any of the activities taking place at the research site. The researcher would enter the site, collect the data and leave (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010:348). For this study two inner city schools were chosen as research sites and as a complete outsider, I conducted focus group interviews with the Grade 1 teachers at the schools. At both schools my participants chose one of the Grade 1 classrooms for the interviews and I therefore had the opportunity to conduct both interviews in the field. This contributed to the fact that the participants were relaxed and could respond to the questions in a natural way.

In both cases my role as complete outsider seemed to change during the interviews as I gained the trust of my participants. According to McMillan and Schumacher (2010:348) this often happens in a qualitative study. I noticed that introducing myself to my participants as someone with prior experience in foundation phase teaching helped them to relax, knowing that they would not be judged. Except for three of the younger and less experienced teachers, all the participants responded to my questions spontaneously and confidently supplied me with rich narratives about their experiences concerning insufficient school readiness. I was invited by one of the participants to do observation in her classroom while her learners were busy with an activity, so as to clarify and further illustrate some of the comments she has made during the interview.

According to McMillan and Schumacher (2010:335) qualitative researchers often have prior professional experience of the phenomenon under investigation, which enables them to empathise with their participants and recognise subtle meanings in the responses of their participants. While interviewing my participants, I realised that I could easily put myself in their position and I could fully understand their concerns and frustration. Since qualitative researchers are known for their subjective reflection and critical self-examination throughout the research process (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010:12), I also realised that I have to be careful not to 'read between the lines', but rather focus on what is said explicitly, in order to make sure that my interpretation of the data stays reliable and valid. Hancock and Algozzine (2006:47) stress the fact that case study researchers must recognise their personal roles,

biases and prejudices, as well as the effects thereof on their research in order to ensure that their conclusions are impartial.

3.6 SAMPLE SELECTION

Sample selection is a critical part of a study, as the quality of the data depends on it (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006:40). In this regard Stake (2005:450) argues that succeeding in gaining an in depth understanding of the phenomenon you are interested in, depends on choosing your participants well. Nieuwenhuis (2007:79) defines sampling as “the process used to select a portion of the population for study” and continues by pointing out that purposive sampling is generally used for qualitative studies, which means that research sites and participants are selected specifically for the purpose of collecting the best data possible to answer the research questions. Similarly Hancock and Algozzine (2006) state that selecting participants who are able to supply the researcher with rich information, should be the most important consideration in the process of sample selection, so as to generate “opportunities for intensive study” (Stake, 2005:451). The selected sample is usually relatively small, since the purpose of a qualitative study is not to generalise the findings, but to gain an in depth understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Nieuwenhuis, 2007:79, Creswell, 2008:213).

Nieuwenhuis explains that a qualitative researcher making use of criterion sampling, will decide beforehand which characteristics the research sites and participants need to have, in order to provide the best insight into the research topic. The number of participants is also determined during this early stage of the study (Nieuwenhuis, 2007:79-80). Stake (2005) explains that after examining the characteristics of the phenomenon, the researcher selects the case or sample offering the best opportunity to learn more about the phenomenon, rather than seeking representativeness (Stake, 2005:451-452). For the purpose of this study, two urban schools in Pretoria currently accommodating learners from disadvantaged backgrounds were selected and all the Grade 1 teachers from these schools were invited to take part in the research. According to Creswell (2008) researchers making use of purposeful sampling need to choose a strategy based on whether sampling occurs before or during data collection. Homogeneous sampling (as one of the six possible strategies mentioned by Creswell where sampling occurs before data collection), is described as selecting

research sites and participants as members in a sub-group with certain characteristics (Creswell, 2008:215-216), and correlates with ‘criterion sampling’ mentioned earlier. In this case Grade 1 teachers with experience in supporting learners with insufficient school readiness at two urban schools were selected. I believe that the best information for exploring teachers’ experiences with regard to insufficient school readiness could be collected from teachers who were trained in Foundation Phase teaching and are now teaching Grade 1 learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. This was also the reason for selecting the two urban schools in Pretoria as research sites for this study, for both schools accommodate a large percentage of learners from disadvantage backgrounds and both schools have well trained and experienced Grade 1 teachers. McMillan and Schumacher (2010:326-327) refer to this purposeful sampling strategy as ‘site selection’, where the research sites are selected according to certain criteria in order to locate participants with the necessary experience and knowledge to provide the information needed to answer the research questions.

3.7 RESEARCH SITES AND PARTICIPANTS

As mentioned before, two urban schools in Pretoria, accommodating a relatively large percentage of learners from disadvantage backgrounds, were selected for the purpose of finding participants with the knowledge and experience I needed to explore the effect of insufficient school readiness on learning in Grade 1. Both schools use English as the language of instruction and in both cases the majority of learners are second language learners (LL2), which means that English is not their mother tongue. Information about the selected schools is indicated in Table 3.3.

Creswell (2008:12) states that a researcher should show respect to the research site by gaining permission from the different gatekeepers at the site before entering the research site, by ensuring that the research site is disturbed as little as possible and by acting as a ‘guest’ at the research site. To gain access to the research sites, I contacted the principals of both schools telephonically to explain the purpose of my study and ask permission to conduct focus group interviews with the Grade 1 teachers, which would take place after school hours and would last approximately 45 minutes. The principal of School 1 agreed and asked me to meet him for further discussion, since he was interested in the study. I made an appointment with the

secretary and discussed the study with the principal in more detail. He signed the letter for permission (see Appendix A) and introduced me to the Head of Department of the foundation phase, who arranged the meeting with the Grade 1 teachers. The principal of School 2 agreed to the data collection during our initial telephone conversation. He arranged with the Head of Department of the foundation phase to contact me and signed the letter for permission on the day I visited the school for the focus group interview (see Appendix B).

Table 3.3: Information about the research sites

Research sites	Location	Number of Grade 1 classes	Number of learners in each Grade 1 class	Language of instruction	Mother tongue or second language learners (LL2)
School 1	Urban, Pretoria	3	30	English	LL2
School 2	Urban, Pretoria	4	27	English	LL2

All the Grade 1 teachers of the selected schools were invited to take part in the study. All of them agreed to the focus group interviews and signed the letters of informed consent (see Appendix C). At the first school only two of the three Grade 1 teachers were available on the day of the first focus group interview. At the second school all four Grade 1 teachers took part in the second focus group interview. At both schools I received a warm welcome and it soon became clear to me that my participants were thankful for the opportunity and eager to talk about their experiences. Three of my participants had more than five years of teaching experience in Grade 1 and the other three participants were young teachers with less than five years teaching experience (see Table 3.4). This gave me the opportunity to compare the experiences and concerns about the effect of insufficient school readiness on teaching and learning of experienced teachers with those of less experienced teachers. The comparison led to interesting findings, which will be discussed in Chapter 4.

Table 3.4: Information about the participants

		Teaching experience in Grade 1	
		More than 5 years	Less than 5 years
School 1	Participant 1	X	
	Participant 2	X	
School 2	Participant 3	X	
	Participant 4		X
	Participant 5		X
	Participant 6		X

3.8 DATA COLLECTION TECHNIQUES

3.8.1 SEMI-STRUCTURED FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS

Fontana and Frey (2005:697-698) state that conducting an interview is one of the most powerful ways through which we attempt to understand human behaviour. The aim of interviews in qualitative research is to collect data that will enable the researcher to understand the phenomenon under investigation from the participants' point of view (Nieuwenhuis, 2007:87). Nieuwenhuis (2007) furthermore claims that if the participants in a study trust the researcher and find the research topic interesting and important they will provide the researcher with rich information that cannot be collected in any other way.

For a semi-structured interview the researcher usually set a predetermined interview schedule with a few questions for the participants. The researcher needs to listen to responses to these questions carefully and probe to clarify answers or seek more information, while keeping the participants focused on the issue at hand (Nieuwenhuis, 2007:87, Hancock & Algozzine, 2006:40). McMillan and Schumacher (2010:355) refer to this type of interview as the 'interview guide approach' where questions or topics are chosen beforehand, but the sequence and wording thereof might change depending on the situation. I have planned to conduct two semi-structured focus group interviews and prepared my interview schedule accordingly (see Appendix D), but things took an interesting turn. At School 1 where I conducted the first interview, the participants were so eager to talk about the topic that I only had the opportunity to introduce myself, explain the purpose of the interview and ask

the first question. They literally ‘plunged’ in and talked non-stop for about an hour. I merely had a few chances for short comments in between. I decided to let them talk, since it was clear that the issue under discussion was extremely important to them. At the end of the interview, they have touched on all the questions I planned to ask, and in the process provided me with rich, descriptive data. The second focus group interview at School 2 was quite different. Again I introduced myself, explained the purpose of the interview and started by asking the first question. There was a silence of a few seconds, before the more experienced teacher answered. I experienced her as a modest person who thinks carefully before giving a very good, but calculated answer. The other three participants were young, less experienced teachers and were clearly hesitant to express their views. For the remainder of the time the interview went exactly as planned – I would ask a question, the more experienced teacher would give me an answer that was well-thought through and the other three participants made comments from time to time. Through probing I could get a little more information from them and towards the end of the interview everyone was more relaxed.

Fontana and Frey (5005) define a focus group interview as “a qualitative data-gathering technique that relies on the systematic questioning of several individuals simultaneously in a formal or informal setting.” Instead of interviewing the participants individually, a homogeneous group is chosen who have certain characteristics in common, which are related to the research topic (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010:363). In retrospect conducting focus group interviews was definitely the right choice for my data collection, since I needed to interview Grade 1 teachers with experience in teaching learners who experience learning difficulties due to insufficient school readiness and half of my participants turned out to be less experienced teachers who were hesitant to share their thoughts. According to Nieuwenhuis (2007:90) focus group interviews produce wider responses, trigger forgotten experiences and contribute to data generation. Participants are more relaxed in the group than what the case would be in individual interviews which was certainly true for my interview at School 2. In this regard Creswell (2008:226) states that those participants who are hesitant to share information, might do so in a focus group interview. Furthermore participants can elaborate on each other’s ideas and comments, contributing to the richness of the data which would not happen during individual interviews (Nieuwenhuis, 2007:90, McMillan & Schumacher, 2010:363).

McMillan and Schumacher (2010) explain that different types of interview questions can be used in a qualitative study, namely questions enquiring about the experiences, opinions, feelings and knowledge of the participants, but stress the fact that questions should be “truly open-ended.” In this regard Creswell (2008) states that responses to open-ended questions create opportunities for probing and further exploration (Creswell, 2008:225). The researcher should also gain the trust of the participants, make eye contact and connect with the participants in order to ensure valid data (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010:357). Being a novice researcher, I did my best to adhere to these aspects, as well as the following, stated by Nieuwenhuis (2007:88), Creswell (2008:228-229) and Hancock and Algozzine (2006:39-41):

- Conduct the interview in a place that is quiet and free from distractions;
- Ensure that the participants are comfortable;
- Make sure that the participants know what the aim of the interview is and which information is required;
- Adhere to all ethical requirements (see section 3.11 for a more detailed discussion);
- Ensure that the questions are clear and make use of probing to clarify answers;
- Stick to a minimum number of questions;
- Follow your interview schedule, but also be flexible;
- Be a good listener – never judge or criticise;
- Be sensitive to non-verbal messages;
- Thank the participants for their time and input at the end of the interview and assure them of confidentiality.

In view of the overarching research questions (see section 3.4), I made use of the following open-ended interview questions (see Appendix C):

- i) How do you experience your Grade 1 learners at the beginning of the year regarding their level of readiness for formal learning?
- ii) What do you regard as the main causes of insufficient school readiness?
- iii) How does the insufficient school readiness of these learners influence your teaching in the classroom?
- iv) What is the effect of insufficient school readiness on the learning and progress of these specific learners?

- v) What are your main concerns regarding the issue of insufficient school readiness?
- vi) What possible solutions can you recommend to improve the level of school readiness of your Grade 1 learners at school entry?

Both focus group interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants and were transcribed for data analysis (Nieuwenhuis, 2007:89, Creswell, 2008:225, 228, Hancock & Algozzine, 2006:40).

3.9 DATA ANALYSIS

Qualitative data analysis is primarily an inductive process of organizing data into categories and identifying patterns and relationships among the categories ... general themes and conclusions emerge from the data rather than being imposed prior to data collection (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010:367).

In a nutshell Creswell (2008) explains that the data in a qualitative study consists of a text database which is analysed by describing the research site and the participants, as well as screening the data for themes or broad categories representing the findings, and in doing so, enabling the researcher to gain a clear picture of the phenomenon under investigation. This is followed by interpreting the meaning thereof in relation to existing research, addressing the research questions and reporting the findings through writing a descriptive research report which includes the personal experiences and reflections of the researcher (Creswell, 2008:57). Nieuwenhuis (2007:100) states that the aim of analysing qualitative data is to understand and interpret the data, keeping the research questions as well as the aims and objectives of the study in mind.

In order to make sense of the data and answer the research questions guiding my study, I intend to follow the steps suggested by Creswell (2008:243-266) and Nieuwenhuis (2007:103-113) in analysing and interpreting qualitative data. Starting the process of data analysis with a description of the participants and the research context will be helpful in understanding the reality of the phenomenon under investigation (Nieuwenhuis, 2007:103-104). The next step will be to prepare the data for analysis, by transcribing the audio-taped interviews to typed files. Placing the data in computer files and developing a matrix or table of the different interviews, will be

helpful in organising the data. Creswell (2008) refers to Agar (1980) when suggesting that the transcripts should then be read in their entirety several times in order to form a holistic picture of each interview before breaking it up into smaller parts (Creswell, 2008:250). While reading through the transcripts to develop a general sense of the data, notes should be made of first impressions, ideas and hunches, referred to by Nieuwenhuis (2007:104) as 'memoing'. Hancock and Algozzine (2006:56-57) suggest keeping a clear focus on the research questions throughout the process of data analysis, which is helpful in distinguishing between relevant and less relevant information.

The transcript of each interview will then be read carefully to look for the underlying meaning in text segments. These segments will be coded by assigning labels to each in the form of words or short phrases accurately describing the meaning of the specific segment (Creswell, 2008:251, Nieuwenhuis, 2007:105-106). From these codes, I will look for emerging themes or categories. This step involves an inductive process where the codes are grouped into broad themes, narrowing the data into five to seven themes (Creswell, 2008:256) or into four to eight categories, according to McMillan and Schumacher (2010:377). Creswell (2008) explains that these themes are the major ideas in the data which are also labelled by short phrases of two to four words, while Hancock and Algozzine (2006:61) stress the fact that these themes should reflect the purpose of the study as well as the research questions. Nieuwenhuis (2007:99) emphasises that the main purpose of inductively analysing the data is to allow research findings to emerge from the themes in the raw data. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) point out that not all the themes or categories will be equally important. Some might be labelled as 'primary themes', while others might be labelled as 'sub-themes' or 'unexpected themes', etc (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010:377).

The themes will then be described or defined, including statements from the participants to clarify the meanings thereof (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006:62, Nieuwenhuis, 2007:109). Through developing and describing the themes, answers to the research questions should start emerging leading to the in-depth understanding of the central phenomenon, which is the ultimate aim of the study (Creswell, 2008:254). The data will be reread to look for new information on each theme. When saturation is reached and no new information can be added to the themes, I will

confirm with the participants that I have adequately interpreted their perceptions (Creswell, 2008:257-258, Hancock & Algozzine, 2006:66). See Chapter 4 for a detailed analysis of the data.

Creswell (2008) recommends a further thematic analysis by layering and interconnecting the themes and in doing so, adding additional insight into the study. Layering the themes involves organising the themes in a hierarchy and working upward from basic themes to more complex ones. Through interconnecting the themes, the researcher looks for relations between themes, for example cause and effect, sequence or chronology (Creswell, 2008:258-259). Similarly Nieuwenhuis (2007:110) recommends structuring of the themes or categories, by looking for relationships, commonalities, contradictions, exceptions etc, while McMillan and Schumacher (2010:378) encourage researchers to look for patterns in the data by examining the relationships between themes or categories in every possible way, trying to make sense of the complexity of the links between them. I will attempt to answer the research questions by displaying the findings visually and constructing a narrative discussion to explain what I have learned from the data analysis. Nieuwenhuis (2007:110-111) suggests making use of a diagram as a visual tool in making sense of the data and presenting it in a way that will enable the reader to follow your line of thinking and interpretation of the findings. The visual representation of the findings should be accompanied by a narrative discussion (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010:380). Creswell defines this narrative discussion as “a written passage in a qualitative study in which authors summarise, in detail, the findings from their data analysis” (Creswell, 2008:262).

Finally I will interpret the findings by giving an overview of the findings, comparing it to past research in the literature and personally reflecting on the meaning of the data from my own perspective (Creswell, 2008:265). Nieuwenhuis (2007) points out that the ultimate aim of data interpretation is to draw conclusions, which have to be based on verifiable data and stresses the fact that these conclusions are only applicable to the specific study and cannot be generalised (Nieuwenhuis, 2007:113). See Chapter 5 for a detailed interpretation of the findings.

3.10 ADDRESSING CREDIBILITY AND TRUSTWORTHINESS

The trustworthiness of the findings in a qualitative study is of the utmost importance and the researcher has to ensure that all interpretations are accurate and valid, throughout the process of data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2008:266; Nieuwenhuis, 2007:113). Since qualitative data analysis is based on the researcher's interpretation of the data, it is essential that the entire process should be done through **continuous self-reflection** (Creswell, 2008:266). Hancock and Algozzine (2006:66) stress the fact that the researcher should mention personal biases as well as the potential effect thereof on the interpretation of the findings. In this regard Nieuwenhuis (2007:114-115) warns that as the researcher becomes more involved with the study and the participants, the risk of bias affecting the interpretations made by the researcher becomes greater and therefore suggests that novice researchers should follow the steps of validating the findings closely. McMillan and Schumacher (2010:379) point out that the researcher should also be aware of the fact that his/her own assumptions and predispositions have an effect on the social situation when face to face contact is made with the participants during data collection. Keeping notes of decisions made by the researcher throughout the research process will assist the readers in understanding his/her final interpretations (Nieuwenhuis, 2007:114). According to Creswell (2008) the word 'bias' is not typically used by qualitative researchers and therefore refers to this essential part of the validating process as 'self-reflection', where the role of the researcher is stated clearly as well as the influence his/her paradigmatic view might have on the research process and the interpretation of the data (Creswell, 2008:266). As a novice researcher working from an interpretivist point of view, I realise the importance of reflecting on my role as researcher, the decisions I have made during the research process as well as the effect thereof on my interpretations of the data. I am also aware of the fact that my previous experience as a foundation phase teacher creates a lens through which I observe the phenomenon I set out to investigate (see section 3.5 for a detailed discussion of my paradigmatic view and role as a researcher).

Triangulation is included as a vital step in the process of validating research by various authors of research methodology (Creswell, 2008:266; Hancock & Algozzine, 2006:66; Nieuwenhuis, 2007:81; McMillan & Schumacher, 2010:379). McMillan and Schumacher (2010:379) refer to triangulation as the "convergence of findings" and

explains that researchers engage in a “cross-validation among data sources, data collection strategies, (etc)... to find regularities in the data ... (and) to see whether the same pattern keeps recurring.” During the process of triangulation, the researcher examines every source of information collected from different participants to find evidence supporting the findings and emerging themes and in doing so, enhances the accuracy thereof (Creswell, 2008:266; Hancock & Algozzine, 2006:66). In this regard Nieuwenhuis (2007) argues that since the aim of a qualitative study is to gain an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon through the different and unique perspectives of the participants, rather than attempting to measure it, “we should not triangulate but crystallise” as proposed by Richardson (2000). In this regard the term ‘crystallisation’ refers to the multi-faceted reality emerging from the data as the researcher interprets the findings (Nieuwenhuis, 2007:81). In other words, this emerging reality represents the researcher’s understanding of the phenomenon and “is credible in so far as those reading our data and analysis will be able to see the same emerging pattern, and this adds to the trustworthiness of our research” (Nieuwenhuis, 2007:81). I believe that working through the thorough process of data-analysis (as described in section 3.9) will enable me to validate my findings and in doing so, enhanced the trustworthiness of my study.

For Hancock and Algozzine (2006:66) the most powerful strategy in validating research findings is to share it with the participants, as it is based on information provided by them during data collection. In this regard Creswell (2008:267) explains that **member checking** entails asking the participants to check whether the transcribed data and the interpretations thereof are accurate and reflective of the meanings they intended to share with the researcher. Similarly McMillan and Schumacher (2010:330) refer to member checking as “verification by participants” and point out that the researcher should ensure that his/her interpretations of the findings and the meanings it has for the participants, are in fact mutual. According to Nieuwenhuis (2007:113-114) member checking can be done at different stages during the research process, for example asking participants for clarification of answers during initial interviews, taking the transcribed versions of the interviews back to participants for verification, asking participants to comment on findings and interpretations and asking participants for comments on a draft report at the end of the study. As I proceeded through my study, I came to realise that keeping in touch

with my participants and keeping the data fresh in my mind, enabled me to stay focused on the reality of my research.

To further enhance the trustworthiness of the interpretation and reporting of the research findings, Nieuwenhuis (2007:114) suggests that the researcher carefully consider the **choice of quotes from the data** which will be used to support arguments or clarify interpretations for the reader. The words of participants should never be used out of context and the quotes should be long enough for the reader to determine the meaning of what the participant was trying to convey. The researcher should never force an interpretation on the data (Nieuwenhuis, 2007:115). See Chapter 4 for a detailed report of the data and Chapter 5 for a detailed interpretation of the research findings.

Conducting an **external audit** is another strategy recommended by Creswell (2008:267) in the process of validating a qualitative study. The researcher requests a person outside the project to review the study and provide feedback on the strengths as well as the weaknesses thereof. Such a review can be done either while the study is still in progress or at the end (Creswell, 2008:267). In this regard Hancock and Algozzine (2006:66) suggest two separate strategies. In the first place a review of the study can be done by a fellow researcher or colleague outside the project, who is familiar with the procedures of such a study and is able to identify any potential threats to the credibility of the study. In the second place the researcher can approach an expert on the topic under investigation to review the study and comment on the clarity and accuracy of the findings (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006:66). As this study was conducted for the purpose of writing a Masters dissertation, the role of experienced researchers guiding me throughout the research process and reviewing my findings and interpretations to ensure the trustworthiness thereof, was fulfilled by my supervisor and co-supervisor. The external examiner/s appointed to review my dissertation at the end of the study will fulfil the role of the knowledgeable person/s on the topic of school readiness.

According to Hancock and Algozzine (2006:66-67) researchers typically **compare their findings to the findings of other studies** in which different methods were used to investigate the same phenomenon, in order to gain further confirmation of what they have discovered. Comparing the findings of my study to those of the

studies I have reviewed in Chapter 2, did in fact confirm that my findings are accurate and trustworthy. See Chapter 5 for a detailed discussion.

Finally Nieuwenhuis (2007:115) suggests that any **discrepancies** in the data or **contradicting findings** should be reported, and all **limitations** of the study should be stated, which will enable the reader to better understand the final conclusions of the researcher and enhance the validity of the findings. See Chapter 5 for more detail regarding these issues.

3.11 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Creswell (2008:238) states that conducting qualitative research “requires a sufficient level of trust based on a high level of participant disclosure” and points out important guidelines which need to be followed in order to proceed ethically. In adhering to these guidelines, my first step was to apply for ethical clearance from the Ethics Committee of the University of Pretoria (see Appendix A). Once my ethics application was approved, I could proceed with the research process. Creswell (2008:11-13) explains that every step in the research process should be taken keeping possible ethical implications in mind and emphasises that ethics should be the researcher’s primary consideration throughout the study.

Creswell (2008:12) states that both the research site and the rights of the participants need to be respected (see section 3.7 for information about the research sites and the procedures I followed to gain access to the sites). Similarly Fontana and Frey (2005:715) state that ethical concerns in a qualitative study typically revolve around the participants in the study. These concerns include obtaining informed consent from the participants, ensuring the anonymity of the participants and protecting them from possible harm. The researcher has to make sure that every participant who was invited to take part in the study is **properly informed** about the purpose of the study, the procedures which will be followed, how the data will be used and what the implications for him/her might be. Furthermore every participant should understand that participation is voluntary and that he/she may withdraw from the study at any time (Creswell, 2008:12; McMillan & Schumacher, 2010:339; Hancock & Algozzine, 2006:40). After introducing myself to my participants, I discussed the purpose of the study with them as well as the procedures that would follow and the information I needed from them. I read through the letter of informed consent (see Appendix B)

and explained their rights to them. I encouraged them to ask questions whenever they felt the need to do so. All the participants signed the letters of informed consent and I could proceed with the focus group interviews.

Participants should be reassured of **confidentiality and anonymity** throughout the research process and specifically in the reporting of the research findings (Creswell, 2008:12; McMillan & Schumacher, 2010:339; Hancock & Algozzine, 2006:47; Nieuwenhuis, 2007:115). In this regard Creswell (2008:11-12) stresses the fact that all research findings should be reported “fully and honestly” and in a way that is understandable for those who took part in the study. The participants should furthermore be provided with an opportunity to have insight in the final reporting of the findings. I assured my participants that their identities would not be revealed at any stage, that the information they share with me will be kept confidential and that they can request insight in the reporting of the findings at any time.

3.12 SUMMARY

The purpose of this chapter was to give a detailed description of the research methodology I made use of in exploring the effect of insufficient school readiness on learning in Grade 1. In order to gain an in-depth understanding of how Grade 1 teachers experience the issue under investigation, I followed a qualitative approach and conducted a multiple instrumental case study. I made use of purposeful sampling in selecting two urban schools in Pretoria and conducted focus group interviews with the Grade 1 teachers at the selected schools. I will now proceed with the data analysis as described under section 3.9. A detailed discussion about the analysis of the data and interpretation of the findings will follow in Chapters 4 and 5.

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CHAPTER 4

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

As mentioned in Chapter 3 a qualitative approach was followed in conducting this multiple instrumental case study. Two urban schools in Pretoria were selected through purposeful sampling and semi-structured focus group interviews were conducted with the Grade 1 teachers of the selected schools. The purpose of the interviews was to collect data on the experiences and concerns of the teachers about the effect of insufficient school readiness on teaching and learning in Grade 1. The interviews were recorded and transcribed and the following steps were followed in analysing the data (see section 3.9 for a detailed discussion):

- i) The transcribed interviews were read several times in order to form a holistic picture of each interview;
- ii) Notes were made on ideas, hunches and first impressions;
- iii) The data was organised in computer files according to the interview questions,
- iv) Text segments were coded using words or short phrases,
- v) Codes were then organised in emerging themes, and the transcribed interviews were colour coded according to the themes.
- vi) The themes that emerged from the data will be presented (Chapter 4) and interpreted with reference to the literature on school readiness research and the ecological theory of Bronfenbrenner (Chapter 5).

The purpose of Chapter 4 is to present the research findings. This will be done according to the themes and subthemes that emerged from the data during the thematic analysis. I will start off with a description of each of the two cases, including the research sites and the participants of each case. Thereafter the themes that emerged from the data will be presented. Quotes from the transcribed focus group interviews will be used to support the presentation of the research findings. The quotes from the first interview (School 1) will be presented in black and those from the second interview (School 2) will be presented in blue.

4.2 DESCRIPTION OF THE CASES

In order to protect the anonymity of the participants, their names and the names of the schools will not be used. I will refer to the schools as 'School 1' and 'School 2' and to the teachers who took part in the focus group interviews as 'Participants 1-6'.

4.2.1 SCHOOL 1

School 1 is an urban school situated just outside the city centre of Pretoria, with approximately 650 learners. Although it is an urban school, the majority of the learners come from rural areas outside Pretoria and are transported to the school and back to the rural areas on a daily basis. The reason for this is that the parents prefer to enrol their children at an urban school with well trained teachers, good resources and according to their perception, a better education for their children. As a result many of these learners have to get up as early as 4 o'clock in the morning to be in time for school.

The school has three Grade 1 classes with 30 learners each. The teachers are all well qualified and the school is equipped with the necessary resources and books. The teachers mentioned however that they had to move out of their Grade 1 classrooms and are using the Grade 2 classrooms this year, which are smaller and less suited for their Grade 1 learners. This was necessary since the Grade 2 classes have 40 learners each and needed the larger classrooms. Even so, the Grade 1 teachers managed to turn their classrooms into rich learning environments in order to provide their learners with as much stimulation as possible.

Two of the three Grade 1 teachers (Participants 1 and 2) were available on the day of the focus group interview and both of them are experienced teachers with more than 5 years of experience in Grade 1 teaching. They were both eager to discuss the effect of insufficient school readiness on the teaching and learning in their classes and provided me with detailed answers to the interview questions.

4.2.2 SCHOOL 2

School 2 is an urban school situated about 5 km outside the city centre of Pretoria, with approximately 840 learners. Similar to School 1, the majority of the learners

come from rural areas outside Pretoria, are transported to school and back to the rural areas every day, and need to get up very early in the morning to be in time for school.

The school has four Grade 1 classes with 27 learners each. As in the case of School 1, all the teachers are well qualified and the school is equipped with resources, apparatus and books. The Grade 1 classrooms are spacious and beautifully decorated to create a welcoming learning environment.

All the Grade 1 teachers took part in the focus group interview. The grade leader (Participant 3) is an experienced teacher with more than 5 years of experience in Grade 1 teaching. She has a warm, caring personality and gives the impression of a confident leader. The other three teachers (Participants 4, 5 and 6) are novice teachers with less than 5 years of teaching experience. They appeared less confident and clearly rely on their grade leader for guidance. The more experienced teacher answered the interview questions confidently by providing well thought through answers, while the less experienced teachers seemed nervous and hesitant to answer.

4.3 DATA ANALYSIS

In view of the overarching research questions (see section 3.4), I made use of the following open-ended interview questions (see Appendix D):

- i) How do you experience your Grade 1 learners at the beginning of the year regarding their level of readiness for formal learning?
- ii) What do you regard as the main causes of insufficient school readiness?
- iii) How does the insufficient school readiness of these learners influence your teaching in the classroom?
- iv) What is the effect of insufficient school readiness on the learning and progress of these specific learners?
- v) What are your main concerns regarding the issue of insufficient school readiness?
- vi) What possible solutions can you recommend to improve the level of school readiness of your Grade 1 learners at school entry?

Both focus group interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants and were transcribed for data analysis (Nieuwenhuis, 2007:89, Creswell, 2008:225, 228, Hancock & Algozzine, 2006:40). A thematic analysis was done as described in the introduction (see section 4.1). The themes and subthemes that emerged from the data are presented in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1 Themes and subthemes that emerged from the data

1. Insufficient school readiness of the learners	
<i>'They are not at all ready to be here'</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) Language acquisition (ii) Ability to listen and follow instructions (iii) Physical well-being and fine motor development (iv) Sense of responsibility and emotional development
2. Causes of insufficient school readiness	
<i>'We talk to the parents, we try to explain'</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) Language of instruction (ii) Emotional coping skills (iii) Parenting (iv) Quality of preschool teaching
3. The impact of insufficient school readiness on teaching	
<i>'Look at us, we are tired and it is only Monday'</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) Disobedience as a result of a lack of listening skills (ii) Overcrowded classrooms (iii) Inability to work in groups (iv) Diversity amongst learners (v) Lack of parental support (vi) Assessment tasks
4. The effect on the learner	
<i>'These little ones, it is just not fair'</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) Poor self-image (ii) Problematic behaviour (iii) Discouragement
5. Main concerns of the teachers	
<i>'They expect too much of them, too much'</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) Learners cannot keep up with the pace and requirements (ii) Insufficient time to lay a strong foundation (iii) Excessive assessment (iv) Supporting learners with insufficient school readiness

6. Teachers' suggestions to improve the readiness of school beginners	
<i>'That's the only way ...'</i>	(i) Improve the quality of preschool teaching (ii) Inform and empower the parents to support their children (iii) Homogeneous grouping of learners (iv) Provision for playtime

The following codes will be used for referencing in the presentation of the research findings:

Table 4.2 Coding of Participants

School 1	Participant 1	S1, P1
	Participant 2	S1, P2
School 2	Participant 3	S2, P3
	Participant 4	S2, P4
	Participant 5	S2, P5
	Participant 6	S2, P6

4.4 RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.4.1 INSUFFICIENT SCHOOL READINESS OF THE LEARNER

'They are not at all ready to be here' (S1, P2, 11)

The Grade 1 teachers at School 1 (participants 1 and 2) indicated that the Grade 1's of 2013 is the weakest group that they have ever had and pointed out that the school readiness level of their learners is declining every year. They explained that the majority of their Grade 1 learners this year came from outside the feeding area of their school and only a small number of them attended their own Grade R classes (of which they have two).

This year's Grade 1's is the weakest group that we have ever had. They are becoming weaker every year (S1, P1, 2-3). Look I've been teaching Grade 1's for decades, it is by far the weakest group that we have had, it is terrible,

I just hope next year will not be worse, because I tell you I can't ... (S1, P2, 188-191).

In comparison the majority of the Grade 1 learners at School 2 attended the Grade R classes at the school and the Grade 1 teachers were impressed with the improvement in the level of school readiness of their learners, especially as far as language development is concerned. The learners who attended the Grade R class from the preschool 'across the road' were also better prepared for Grade 1 in comparison with what they have experienced in previous years.

Well it has improved, as I've said, because I mean our Grade R teachers are excellent teachers, so I'm not sure what it is like at the other schools, but I can say definitely from our Grade R's, I've seen an improvement and even from across the road, there is definitely an improvement from last year to this year (S2, P3, 45-49).

4.4.1.1 Language acquisition

Participants 1 and 2 (School 1) experience the level of language acquisition of their learners as one of the main areas of concern. The learners do not understand English (the language of instruction) and therefore formal instruction cannot start right away.

A big problem is their language – it is not their mother tongue, it is not mother tongue instruction. We first have to get these little children on a level where you can continue with teaching. It is a big problem for me ... they do not understand the language ... (S1, P2, 3-7).

The teachers at School 2 on the other hand, mentioned that they experienced an improvement in the language acquisition of their Grade 1's, due to the excellent work of their Grade R teachers in preparing the learners for school entry.

I think may be because most of our kids actually come from our Grade R classes, the language this year, I'm not talking about previous years, but this year in particular, it has been well developed (S2, P3, 27-30).

The level of language acquisition was the only significant difference between the two schools as far as school readiness is concerned. The rest of their experiences regarding this issue are very similar.

4.4.1.2 Ability to listen and follow instructions

The participants at both schools indicated a lack of listening skills and an inability to follow basic instructions as areas of concern in the level of school readiness of their learners. In the case of School 1, this can be the result of an inability to listen and comprehend and/or a language barrier, whereas School 2 stated clearly that language is not necessarily the cause thereof, since they feel that their learners' language acquisition is better than previous years. In both cases the participants mentioned that the inability to listen and follow instructions can be the result of disobedience, which often leads to disruptive behaviour. Participant 2 (School 1) mentioned that the learners should have acquired some of the basic skills from prior experience in a pre-school environment, which the majority of their learners do not have.

And then these little children who do not understand what their teacher is saying, they do not understand ... another thing is listening skills, these little ones are not able to listen, discipline, it is a big problem. They cannot sit on a chair yet, they cannot sit still for one second ... and the basic things that a young child of six already should know, they do not know. For example, sit on your chair, listen to the teacher, stop fiddling, these things, every child has a problem if you look at it this way. Cannot stand in a line, cannot walk in a line, cannot wait his turn, these are things, fine they have to learn it, but they should have had some experience in it before they come to us (S1, P2, 15-17, 27-33). Basic instructions, for example, take out your book, it takes forever ... concentration, it gets worse every year. It is very bad (S1, P1, 36, 39-40).

It is as if the visual perceptual problems are not as serious as the auditory perceptual problems. Auditory has suddenly exploded it is very, very weak (S1, P1, 64-66).

The basic areas that we find that they are lacking, they don't know how to listen and interpret basically your questions. It's not necessarily a language

problem, it's more the listening, they don't want to hear and do, a lack of obedience as well. They are really disobedient at times (S2, P3, 2-7).

... they are very disruptive, I find because sometimes they don't understand the work and then they become naughty, bothering the other children ... even simple instructions, they don't follow them (S2, P3, 104-106, 109-110).

4.4.1.3 Physical well-being and fine motor development

As far as physical well-being is concerned, Participants 1 and 2 expressed their concern about the lack of concentration, especially during the morning, due to tiredness. Since many of the children come from rural areas and travel far, they have to get up very early to be on time. As a result they struggle to concentrate and often fall asleep in class.

Those children have to get up at four o'clock in the morning then they are dead tired, the little ones are sleeping in the class. They are fast asleep. Fast asleep (S1, P1, 58-60).

Besides the fact that many of the learners have to get up very early, their teachers found that many of them are tired in class because they go to bed very late. Some of them are allowed to watch late television shows, especially during weekends, including Sunday nights, resulting in an inability to stay awake in class the next day.

We found that on a Monday morning, those children sit here and they are dead tired. Then you would ask: Who watched Spiderman last night? Me Mam! Then I know that programme, it carries on until ten or ten thirty at night (S1, P1, 54-58).

The participants at School 1 expressed their concerns about the learners' eating habits. Although most of them are active, there are some learners who are overweight. In some cases to such an extent that it affects the child's movements and ability to function in class.

Yes, but they love climbing and playing and they still run around everywhere, but there is a problem with weight, a six year old that weighs 45 kg. You can think that little one cannot move the way he should, they cannot sit properly

at the tables. You know, spatial, these children cannot work in smaller spaces at all (S1, P2, 107-111).

We teach them, we tell the parents, give them healthy food ... I complain a lot about that. It is a big problem for me, the food is really a big problem, Okay, they often bring a big plate cooked food, but others come with packets of chips, and it's cookies, Kentucky fried chicken, or they have money, tuck-shop money (S1, P1, 277-283).

The participants at both schools mentioned poorly developed fine motor skills as one of the areas of concern. The learners struggle with colouring, cutting and pasting, and are not ready to start with formal writing.

We mentioned auditory and visual perceptual problems, but even the fine motor skills are very weak, those perceptual skills (S1, P2, 103-105).

Perceptual wise I find that some of my children colouring in, they tend to colour in any direction, instead of just one way, cutting out skills, very poor, pasting (S2, P3, 7-9).

4.4.1.4 Sense of responsibility and emotional development

Participant 1 (School 1) mentioned that many of the learners lack a sense of responsibility and are not able to take care of their belongings. It causes a lot of frustration in class when pencils and other stationery are missing and time is lost when they have to stop working to look for it. Together with the lack of responsibility Participant 1 mentioned 'learned helplessness', when the learners lost something and are not able to find it. Furthermore some of the learners start crying as a result of the pressure in class when they cannot continue with a task because they have lost something. This proves that they are not emotionally ready to handle the pressure of formal learning.

And to take care of their belongings, nothing, you know they, they break everything, they cannot look after their stuff, it lies around. I had one child today, four times her pencil was picked up, then they come 'I can't find my pencil', they have this learned helplessness, 'I can't, I don't remember' (S1, P1, 116-121).

Aids they want us to use, those charts and stuff, if you start, half of it is missing, 'I don't know', then you spend half an hour to look for it, because if he doesn't find it he starts crying. Emotionally they are not ready yet, they do not know how to handle themselves and how to look for something. They are used to the fact that it is done for them (S1, P1, 155-160).

Participant 1 expressed her concern about the expectations of parents that their children will receive a better education in an urban school than in the rural schools, without realising that it is jeopardised by the fact that their children are not ready for formal learning.

The parents think they will get a better education here, they come from very far, but it will not necessarily happen, because the child is not ready (S1, P1, 339-341).

4.4.2 CAUSES OF INSUFFICIENT SCHOOL READINESS

'We talk to the parents, we try to explain' (S2, P3, 77-78)

4.4.2.1 Language of instruction

For the participants at School 1 one of the main causes of the poor level of school readiness of their Grade 1 learners is the fact that many of them do not understand the language of instruction. English is not their mother tongue and some of the learners hear English only at school, since it is not spoken at home. Those who are exposed to English outside the school experience problems with the correct pronunciation of the language.

A big problem is their language – it is not their mother tongue, it is not mother tongue instruction. We first have to get these little children on a level where you can continue with teaching. It is a big problem for me ... they do not understand the language ... (S1, P2, 3-7).

Besides the language that they don't understand, those who do understand English understand it the way their parents speak English. So the type of English they hear is another thing. So the language is a big problem, because they do not understand (S1, P1, 11-15).

At school 2 Participant 3 explained that in the past they experienced the same problems with the language of instruction not being the home language of their learners, but pointed out that this year it is different:

We don't really have too many children with that language deprivation. So this year is not so much of a problem, where as previous years there were (S2, P3, 30-32).

4.4.2.2 Emotional coping skills

The participants at both schools expressed their concerns about the learners who are enrolled for Grade 1 at an age of five (turning six before the end of June). Many of these learners are not ready for formal learning and even though the parents were advised to keep them back for another year, they still believe their children will be able to cope in Grade 1. Participant 3 (School 2) emphasised the fact that these learners are not able to handle the pressure in the classroom, because they are not emotionally ready for the challenges of formal learning.

... and then they are far too young. We had one who just turned six today. Many of these little ones are intelligent, but not at all ready to be here (S1, P2, 9-11).

Look, it is cheaper to send a child to school ... we have started this year, we tried, with the parents who bring their children to school at this very young age, then the secretary brings them here to me. Then I explain to them what it is all about, because everyone always tells me 'they are very bright, just give them a chance', but in the middle of the year, they say 'wow'... (S1, P1, 80-85).

Yes, I've got one child for example, she's a bright little girl, but if she had stayed behind a year later, she would have been top of the class. But now, because of enrolling too early, emotionally she can't handle the pressure, you know what I mean, so unfortunately she is an average child where she could have been a top child (S2, P3, 55-59).

We are not allowed to say you are not allowed to come to school, because it's according to law, they are allowed to. But I know the grade R's do, they advise the parents as such. They say the kids will benefit if they are

emotionally stable as well, not just academically. I also speak to the parents, that one year of extra input, and I say, you know this is my experience (S2, P3, 69-72, 77-78).

4.4.2.3 Parenting

Participants 1 and 2 (School 1) pointed out a number of aspects in the way the parents raise their children, which differ from their way of doing in the classroom. They mentioned that many of the parents are unaware of what is expected of their children in the classroom, for example to listen to instructions, wait for their turn to speak or obey the class rules.

Mom and Dad will listen immediately, where we say, wait, I am talking. They do not understand, it is my turn, and then it is your turn (S1, P1, 17-19).

... they experience discipline or the listening to instructions differently from us, because many times you would call in the parent and say that you are struggling with this little one in your class, and the parents will be amazed and will ask: what does the child do wrong? (S1, P1, 20-24)

The teachers are concerned about the television programmes their learners are allowed to watch, the hours they spend in front of the television and the amount of violence they are exposed to.

It is also nowadays a common habit under parents, it is easy to tell the children to shhh... and sit in front of the television – watch your programme, Mommy is busy. And it is action, it's kicking, shooting and killing (S1, P2, 41-44).

We found that on a Monday morning, those children sit here and they are dead tired. Then you would ask: Who watched Spiderman last night? Me Mam! Then I know that programme, it carries on until ten or ten thirty at night. Those children have to get up at four o'clock in the morning then they are dead tired, the little ones are sleeping in the class (S1, P1, 54-59).

Many of the children do not have proper supervision after school. Some of them stay with grandparents who do not set rules for the children or see to it that they have a strict routine.

The children might for example grow up with Granny, because Mom works until seven or eight o'clock in the evening. Granny is illiterate, it's really, it is a big problem, and they do not know how, or what is right and acceptable. For them, it is ok if the child is running around and just carrying on (S1, P1, 50-54).

they say we are too strict and this and that, but at home it is this 'let them be', 'you can play with your friends in the streets', 'just make sure that you sleep at home'. You see it is really a big difference, and I feel parents must also be informed about what will be expected from their children (S1, P1, 266-271).

4.4.2.4 Quality of preschool teaching

Another cause for concern is the quality of teaching the learners are exposed to during their preschool years, and more specifically the Grade R year, which should focus specifically on preparing the learners for formal learning. Participant 1 mentioned that many of the Grade 1 learners were taught the alphabet names of the letters, instead of the phonics or sounds by either the parents or the preschool teachers.

As far as work is concerned, again the parents and even the preschool teachers don't know how to teach the children, they still teach the children A,B,C and then they come here 'A for apple'. And then pronunciation itself, for example 'elephant', we get that, 'e', 'a', especially the vowels, yes, the vowels, they don't hear those differences. So there it is the pronunciation of the English, it is really a big problem. And that confuses the children a lot (S1, P1, 66-72).

Furthermore Participant 2 pointed out that parents are often misled by the fact that their children 'graduated from preschool' and just assume that it means their children are ready for Grade 1.

... and those who came from the other preschools are very weak ...the mother stood here crying, telling me that the preschool has graduated the child, so for me a big problem is the preschools that are uninformed about what school readiness is, they just send all of them and say that they are ready, but they are not (S1, P2, 97-103).

4.4.3 THE IMPACT OF INSUFFICIENT SCHOOL READINESS ON TEACHING

'Look at us, we are tired and it is only Monday' (S1, P2, 373-374)

4.4.3.1 Disobedience as a result of a lack of listening skills

Participants 1, 2 and 3 (Schools 1 and 2) expressed their concern about the fact that the learners who cannot keep up with the work are talkative and disruptive. The teachers experience frustration because they struggle to keep the class quiet and a lot of their teaching time is lost in the process of reprimanding the learners instead of teaching. These learners are not able to concentrate or follow instructions and even simple instructions need to be repeated several times. This is very tiring for the teachers.

They have basic things, look, I cannot teach a class if there is a hum, they have to be quiet otherwise they cannot hear what I am saying (S1, P2, 24-26).

Some days it feels as if I am not teaching them anything, I am busy with behaviour all the time (S1, P2, 33-34).

Look, they are very disruptive, I find because sometimes they don't understand the work and then they become naughty, bothering the other children. They create a huge problem, then your time, the time you spend reprimanding them instead of teaching, so it's a big problem for us (S2, P3, 104-108).

I can't work with a buzz in the class. You just cannot get them to be quiet ... just look at us, we are tired and it is only Monday (S1, P2, 372-374).

Concentration. Oh, it is terrible. You know, it is like, I tell them sometimes it is like pop corn, they just pop like this, each one in another place, if you have one down, another one starts (S1, P1, 184-186).

Basic instructions, for example, take out your book, it takes forever (S1, P1, 36).

And explaining over and over again for them ... even simple instructions, they don't follow them (S2, P3, 108-109).

4.4.3.2 Overcrowded classrooms

At School 1 where the Grade 1's have to make use of smaller classrooms (see section 4.2.1), they experience the organisation of space in the classroom as problematic. The participants (1 and 2) explained that thirty learners in a Grade 1 class are too many and besides that, there are many learners who have to sit alone, because they are not able to share their tables with other learners.

I have so many children who have to sit alone, they cannot, they cannot work with someone else. Those who are sitting together are already a frustration for me, they really need space. So that is for them, that spatial thing, is a big problem (S1, P1, 113-116).

Thirty in a Grade 1 class, it is already a lot, with all the barriers there are ... if I think quickly, I have eleven children who must sit alone at a table, because they do not just disturb the children around them, they disturb themselves, they cannot share that small space with someone. You have to see it, you don't believe us when we say it (S1, P2, 125-126, 128-130).

4.4.3.3 Inability to work in groups

At both schools the participants experienced that even though it is expected from them to do group work with the Grade 1's many of their learners are not ready for it. They are unable to share, take turns or work independently, which means that the teacher cannot work with one group, leaving the other groups to carry on with a task on their own.

Because you have to do Life Skills and all those things and then they expect us to do group work, [oh, that does not work (S1, P2)], there is no way, I do not do group work in mathematics, in the first place, space is a problem, secondly if you start with one group, the others break down, there is no discipline, even if you keep them in for break or whatever, they're just not ready for it. The other Grades start with it, but if they come and confront me with it, I will just say 'come and show me how' (S1, P1, 147-154).

In my class I cannot do group work, they fight about everything, they cannot share, give one another a chance, taking turns. I have always found that at this age it is difficult to work in groups, always. And the problem is, what I found, is when you are busy with one group, then the rest of them want your attention and they cannot sit still by themselves and work independently, not at this stage. So it is very difficult for us as Grade 1 teachers to sit with a group on the carpet, you know, and teach them while the other groups are at their tables (S2, P3, 16-24).

4.4.3.4 Diversity amongst learners

Another important issue that was mentioned by the participants at both schools is the difference between the learners who are ready for formal learning and those who are not. In their experience the learners with insufficient school readiness keep the stronger learners back, resulting in the stronger learners becoming bored and disruptive.

That is another thing, the diversity amongst the children. You have a group of clever ones and a lot of weak ones. And the strong learners are the ones with the behavioural problems, because they are bored, you don't have time to give them something extra, because you still have to explain it to them. I cannot help the weak ones, because I have to get through this pile of work (S1, P1, 386-391).

Well, the ones who are not ready is a big problem, because they keep the whole class behind and the ones who are top of the class, sit and they get bored because you have to focus your attention on the slow ones. There's a huge gap, well in my class, between the tops and bottoms, there is really, yes (S2, P3, 92-97).

4.4.3.5 Lack of parental support

As far as parental support is concerned, the participants at both schools experienced a lack thereof. In some cases the parents try to help their children with homework, but do not understand what to do, in other cases there is a complete lack of interest and the homework is not done, or the books are not signed.

... then the support from the parents, because the parents don't know how to help the children. Look, their homework takes me longer than my preparation for class, because I try to show them exactly and then it just is not done, or the parents do not understand it (S1, P1, 73-77).

There are some parents who are very supportive and very involved in the children's lives, but you also have the parents who don't spend any time with them or do anything. Especially, we send our books home to be signed, so that the parents can actually have a look at the children's work, and often it comes back not signed. I also find that they don't always know how to help their children, simple things like the sounds. They teach them ABC, instead of abc, they don't always know (S2, P3, 81-88).

You get some parents who are dedicated, but you also get parents who do nothing. It is as if the parents also give up trying (S1, P2, 321-323).

4.4.3.6 Assessment tasks

The participants at School 1 indicated that they find it very difficult to assess the learners who struggle with the work, because they follow other learners when they don't understand instructions and merely copy everything from them. As a result these learners have to be assessed separately from the others or even individually, which is time consuming.

You see, another thing that I think of now with the assessment of these little things, they have eyes like chameleons, they just do this. They copy so much, then you think, wow, this child is clever, until the day that you assess this child individually, then you see, but this child can do absolutely nothing. And then you have a bigger problem. So now, when we write tests, I let every row write on their own, for example first the one row on this side and then on the other side, because they are copying. They are dependent on each other. They don't understand the instructions at all (S1, P1, 168-175, 182).

Teachers experience the overall effect of supporting and teaching learners with insufficient school readiness as demanding and tiring.

It is, you know, it feels to me now already as if it is the end of November, you are drained, you are done, it takes everything out of you (S1, P2, 186-188).

4.4.4 THE EFFECT ON THE LEARNER

'These little ones, it is just not fair'

4.4.4.1 Poor self-image

Both Participants 2 and 3 indicated that the learners who are struggling to cope with the formal work soon realise that they are unable to do what their friends are doing. This has a negative effect on their self-image – they experience themselves as incompetent, which in many cases leads to a loss of interest and/or disruptive behaviour.

The little ones soon feel 'I cannot do what my friends can do', not that you focus on it or make an example of the child, he can just see that 'I don't know what my teacher is saying now, and my friends can do it', so they know very well that they cannot cope. And then they disturb their friends. And many times I can see that the child is losing all interest, "I cannot do it, so why should I try?" (S1, P2, 312-318)

Definitely they know it, they have a poor self-image and that is why they play up. We try our best, you know to help them, but it doesn't always work. Then what happens is normally they repeat the grade (S2, P3, 114-116).

4.4.4.2 Problematic behaviour

Participant 1 explained that problematic behaviour tends to occur in the second year when learners repeat Grade 1. According to her these learners often become the 'bullies' or 'trouble makers' because they are older than the rest of the learners, suffer from a low self-esteem and find the work boring.

You know, yes, I have for example a child who is repeating this year, he was in the other class last year. You know, in the year in which he is repeating, he is actually ready for it, but he has already done the work, so he is bored, and those children become your trouble makers. They have this attitude, they have really, because they are actually now your big children, they are

eight in comparison with some of my children who are five years old. You have this big difference in ages, and then they bully the younger ones. It is just a whole lot of problems, behavioural problems, their behavioural problems surface especially in the second year (S1, P1, 303-312).

4.4.4.3 Discouragement

According to Participant 2 many children get discouraged because the expectations are too high. She feels that it is unfair to put so much pressure on learners, causing them to give up trying.

I just feel that we expect too much of these children. We said from the beginning when all the changes started, we don't want to lower our standards, we try, but at the moment, we are not going to make it at this pace, we just expect too much of them. It is not fair towards the children some of these children just give up, because it is just too much (S1, P2, 374-379).

4.4.5 MAIN CONCERNS OF THE TEACHERS

'They expect too much of the children, definitely, too much' (S2, P3, 146-147)

4.4.5.1 Learners cannot keep up with the pace and requirements

At both schools the participants feel that the expectations are too high and the work load is too much. They feel that they have to rush through the curriculum even though their learners are not ready and are unable to keep up. They are concerned about the fact that the requirements and the reality in the classroom do not match.

You cannot, you cannot expect that, the expectations are too high for these little ones who are not ready for school yet. It is an ideal situation that is not practical. Not here with us (S1, P2, 163-165).

The pace, the requirements ... it is as if they want to teach these children too soon too many things, they are not ready for it, physically they are not ready for it, now where in the past we spend the whole first quarter on addition, now we have to do addition, subtraction, doubling and halving. It's about the number concept and other things, the policy and the reality in the classroom

and what the department gives us, those blue DOE (Dept of Education) books, nothing comes together. That book is beautiful, colourful, the most beautiful pictures, but it does not correlate with the policy at all. We don't know what they want us to do (S1, P1, 239-248).

The work load and the fact that we can't stand still at one concept and lay the foundation properly and then only carry on (S2, P3, 161-162).

In both cases the participants feel that it is not only the learners with insufficient school readiness who are unable to keep up, but all their Grade 1's.

I don't think it is only about the children who were not ready, I think it is in general the requirements are too much ... you know these children are only on the concrete level now, they are not on an abstract level yet. That is just the way it is. Now you have to do problem solving with them, they don't even understand more and less, we are still trying to teach them to sit and to get up. And they take a very long time to learn that because they can also not follow instructions (S1, P2, 249-251, 259-265).

In the past we have done English on the first additional level, now we do it on home language level and we also do Afrikaans extra. It is too much, they expect too much of these children (S1, P2, 134-137).

As a rule all of them struggle. All the Grade 1's. Yes. I just feel the curriculum, they expect too much of the children, definitely, too much (S2, P3, 145-147).

4.4.5.2 Insufficient time to lay a strong foundation

According to the participants, they are not allowed enough time in the curriculum to lay a proper foundation and are forced to move on to new concepts before the previous ones were mastered properly.

For example the mathematics, it is a problem, because they did not master one concept properly, then, it's addition, subtraction, doubling, halving, more and less, it's just too many concepts, they haven't mastered one then the next one is there. The foundation is not laid properly, that is why we have so many learning problems later on (S1, P1, 391-396).

I don't think your foundations are strong then, usually you finish one concept before you do the next one. If you have so many, I mean you're just touching on it and then you carry on. The other thing is word problems in Grade 1, they can barely read, but they must do word problems (S2, P3, 151-155).

And the policy tells you in some places two minutes for this, three minutes for that, one minute for that ... it's not practical (S1, P1, 286-288).

4.4.5.3 Excessive assessment

In both cases the participants feel that they have to spend too much of their teaching time on formal assessment. According to them a lot of formal assessment has to be done, sometimes on a daily basis, which is often not possible because their learners are not ready for the assessment yet. They are concerned about the fact that both the curriculum and the expected assessment are inaccessible for the learners, as well as the tiring effect that the excessive assessment has on the learners.

You know, if you look for example at the expectations of the policy, there are a lot of things that have to be assessed. Now in the first place our children are not ready for it (S1, P2, 132-134).

The assessment, you know, I feel you just started the quarter then you assess, because that is what is expected of you. Now, but you cannot, because you are busy here with a child, then the rest breaks down the class. You cannot say to them, this is now your work, I expect this from you, because they cannot, you spoon-feed them literally one sum at a time. That is really a big problem for us. So the assessment, the policy is a big problem, it is not on our children's (level), it is very, very difficult for them. It does not make provision for that, for making it accessible for them, for us to uplift them, they must just fall in and understand (S1, P1, 137-146).

It's too much for them. It really is, I mean they should still be playing at this stage and to sit down and do formal work, they are really not ready yet. And formal assessment so much each day, it's tiring for them (S2, P3, 161-162).

Participant 2 raised the issue of the Annual National Assessment (ANA), pointing out that they are concerned about it. They know their learners will not be ready in time, since the expectations are unrealistic.

The ANA tests are like a dark cloud above our heads, because if you don't do well, you are called in and they have a serious talk with you. Now we put a lot of pressure on these children. I feel we go much too fast with them, we have to slow down, but we cannot, we have to get through all this work before September. I get nightmares about it, these ANA tests and my children have to perform (S1, P2, 230-235).

4.4.5.4 Supporting learners with insufficient school readiness

Participant 2 explained that in the rush to get through the curriculum, there is no spare time to spend with the learners who need extra support. Merely calling them to her table to explain a task again, is not always sufficient. They need individual support over a long period of time in order to catch up.

At the moment, you know which children have problems, you know, but when must you take them? I let them stand at my table or around my table, and then you explain to them, but that is not always enough. It does not happen overnight, as you know it is a long process to get that little one to catch up with the others (S1, P2, 224-229).

In this regard Participant 2 pointed out that they receive very little reaction from the Department of Education when they refer a learner for support. Referring the learners for professional support is often unsuccessful, since many parents cannot afford therapy over an extended period of time.

We refer many children for professional support, to the remedial teacher, the occupational therapist, the speech therapist. My big problem is the parents that tell you they don't have the money, they cannot send the child, then you sit with your finger in your ear. I don't know what else to do, because from the department's side you get very little support (S1, P1, 212-217).

Participant 3 expressed her concern about the way learners are currently promoted to the next grade without a solid foundation. She feels that this practice is not in the best interest of the learners.

...because of our system, that they are basically pushed through, instead of keeping them back. Yes. They are told you can go through. And usually the big trouble is in Grade 3, and that to me is wrong, you should say stop, you got to have the basics before you go to Grade 4 (S2, P3, 123-127).

4.4.6 Teachers' suggestions to improve the readiness of school beginners

'That's the only way' (S2, P3, 171)

4.4.6.1 Improve the quality of preschool teaching

In both cases the participants suggested that improving the quality of preschool teaching, especially the Grade R year, will improve the level of school readiness of Grade 1 learners at school entry.

I think in the first place, it has to start with the preschools. Those programmes, they have to do thorough work, it should not be only the urban schools, doing everything, and the others just carrying on as before, they have to look at the rural preschools and make sure that they do their work (S1, P1, 334-338).

At this stage I think our Grade R's have done a pretty good job of doing what they were supposed to have done, especially this year. So that Grade R year, that preschool year is extremely important. Yes, definitely (S2, P3, 223-224, 231-232).

4.4.6.2 Inform and empower the parents to support their children

In the second place parents should be involved from the start and informed on how to support their children. Participant 1 suggested that the parents of preschool children can be informed about school readiness through community projects or lectures.

I also think in the process, parents have to be informed on how to teach their children. They have to be involved from the start, especially at the preschools, get them together, give them lectures, tell them, start a community project (S1, P1, 341-345).

4.4.6.3 Homogeneous grouping of learners

Participant 3 suggested that the learners should be grouped according to their level of readiness for formal learning enabling the teacher to work on their level and at their pace, instead of having a heterogeneous group where the stronger learners are held back by the ones who are struggling.

I would say, put all the children that's on one level in one class, so that you could follow, or do the work on their level, the slow ones and then the top ones in one class so that you can do additional, extra work with them. Now they are keeping everybody behind, a mixture, yes it's a mixture, because you can't discriminate or whatever. That's the only way, I don't know, for me (S2, P3, 166-171).

She mentioned that it was done in the past and according to her, it worked well.

...the children were grouped according to their ages ... and then we also had that perceptual work at the beginning ... That's what we did as well, but then that all stopped, because we were not allowed to do that anymore. And I thought that that was such a pity, because I mean the amount of progress that you could see in those children, it was amazing. And I mean even those children who were the slower group, eventually caught up, because you could work at their pace (S2, P3, 179-184).

Similarly Participant 2 stated:

That is something that I have wished for many times, because then you can go on with the stronger ones and work with the weaker ones on their level, but you are not allowed to (S1, P2, 399-401).

Participant 3 suggested that as an alternative, learners could be grouped according to language ability.

You could group them according to their language ability, not necessarily their maths, because I saw their maths can be tops, but if you do it according to their language ... (S2, P3, 197-200).

4.4.6.4 Provision for playtime

Furthermore participant 3 suggested that the curriculum should make provision for playtime and more practical activities, instead of rushing through formal class work. She feels that young children should be allowed to learn through playing and having fun.

The one thing that I do find is missing in our curriculum, is the playtime, you know children should be allowed to play and do a lot more practical activities that are fun. The curriculum at the moment is basically mainly at the desks, a fast pace all the time, instead of just slowing down and enjoying it a bit (S2, P3, 233-238).

See Table 4.3 for a summary of the participants' responses according to the themes.

Table 4.3: Summary of themes and the responses of the participants

Themes	Responses of participants
Insufficient school readiness of the learners	<p>The majority of Grade 1 learners are not ready for formal learning;</p> <p>Language is a big problem, although there are signs of improvement in some cases;</p> <p>Learners lack listening skills and are unable to follow instructions;</p> <p>Many learners are tired and fall asleep in class;</p> <p>Fine motor skills are poorly developed;</p> <p>Many learners lack a sense of responsibility and are emotionally not ready for the demands of formal learning.</p>
Causes of insufficient school readiness	<p>Inability to understand the language of instruction;</p> <p>Enrolment at an age of five;</p> <p>Parenting (ignorance, no routine, no proper supervision);</p> <p>Poor quality of preschool teaching.</p>
The impact of insufficient school readiness on teaching	<p>Disobedience resulting from a lack of listening skills;</p> <p>Single seating arrangements are problematic;</p> <p>Inability to work independently, as well as an inability to work in groups;</p> <p>Diversity amongst learners;</p> <p>Lack of parental support.</p>
The effect on the learner	<p>Poor self-image;</p> <p>Problematic behaviour;</p> <p>Learners get discouraged.</p>

Themes	Responses of participants
Main concerns of the teachers	Learners cannot keep up with the pace and requirements of the curriculum; Insufficient time to lay a strong foundation; Excessive assessment; No time for individual support. Learners are promoted without a solid foundation.
Teachers' suggestions to improve the readiness of school beginners	Improve the quality of preschool teaching; Inform and empower parents to support their children; Homogeneous grouping of learners. Slow down and make provision for playtime.

4.5 SUMMARY

The aim of Chapter 4 was to present the research findings according to the themes and subthemes that emerged from the data during the thematic analysis of the transcribed focus group interviews. The participants' experiences regarding the level of school readiness of their learners at school entry, the main causes of insufficient school readiness, as well as the impact thereof on teaching and learning in the classroom were presented. Furthermore the main concerns of the participants regarding the issue of insufficient school readiness and their suggestions of how it can be addressed were presented.

After conducting my literature study I had a clear picture in my mind about the importance of school readiness, the complexity thereof, as well as the fact that it is a phenomenon that is constantly investigated worldwide. I was convinced that in an attempt to find answers to my research questions on the impact of insufficient school readiness on teaching and learning in Grade 1, the Grade 1 teachers who are confronted with this issue on a daily basis, will be the best people to approach. I was pleasantly surprised with my research findings, as it lived up to my expectations and confirmed what I have found in the literature on school readiness research. Although I was disappointed at first with the limited participation of the three novice teachers at School 2, I came to realise that they are overwhelmed by the reality in their classrooms and since they lack teaching experience, they doubt their own competency as teachers. This issue will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.

Since I followed the recommended steps in analysing qualitative data (see section 3.9) and presented my findings thoroughly and clearly, with quotes from the data to support the themes and subthemes, I regard my research findings as trustworthy and I believe that it will be of great value in answering my research questions. In Chapter 5 the research findings will be discussed with reference to the literature on school readiness research and the ecological theory of Bronfenbrenner, in order to make sense of the research findings and reach an in-depth understanding of the issue under investigation.

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CHAPTER 5

INTERPRETATION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

5.1 INTRODUCTION

In Chapter 4 the research findings were presented according to the themes and subthemes that emerged from the data during the data analysis. The participants' experiences regarding the level of school readiness of their learners at school entry, the main causes of insufficient school readiness, as well as the effect thereof on teaching and learning in the classroom were presented. Furthermore the main concerns of the participants regarding the issue of insufficient school readiness and their suggestions of how it can be addressed were presented.

The next step, as recommended by Creswell (2008, 260-261), is to conduct a further thematic analysis by layering and interconnecting the themes in order to look for relations between the themes. In this regard both Creswell (2008) and Nieuwenhuis (2007) suggest a visual presentation of the connections between the themes, followed by a comparison of the research findings to past research in the literature in the form of a narrative discussion, while personally reflecting on the meaning of the findings (see section 3.9 for a detailed discussion of this procedure).

A visual presentation of the connections between the themes, as referred to above, is presented as a model on the impact of insufficient school readiness on teaching and learning in Grade 1 (see Figure 5.1).

The purpose of Chapter 5 is to discuss the research findings with reference to the research aim (see section 1.4) and the relevant literature (i.e. the theoretical framework and contextual data) on school readiness research as stated in Chapter 2. In order to assist me in substantiating my arguments related to the data I again refer to specific empirical findings as presented in Chapter 4. This procedure will assist me in making sense of the research findings and reach an in-depth understanding of the issue under investigation.

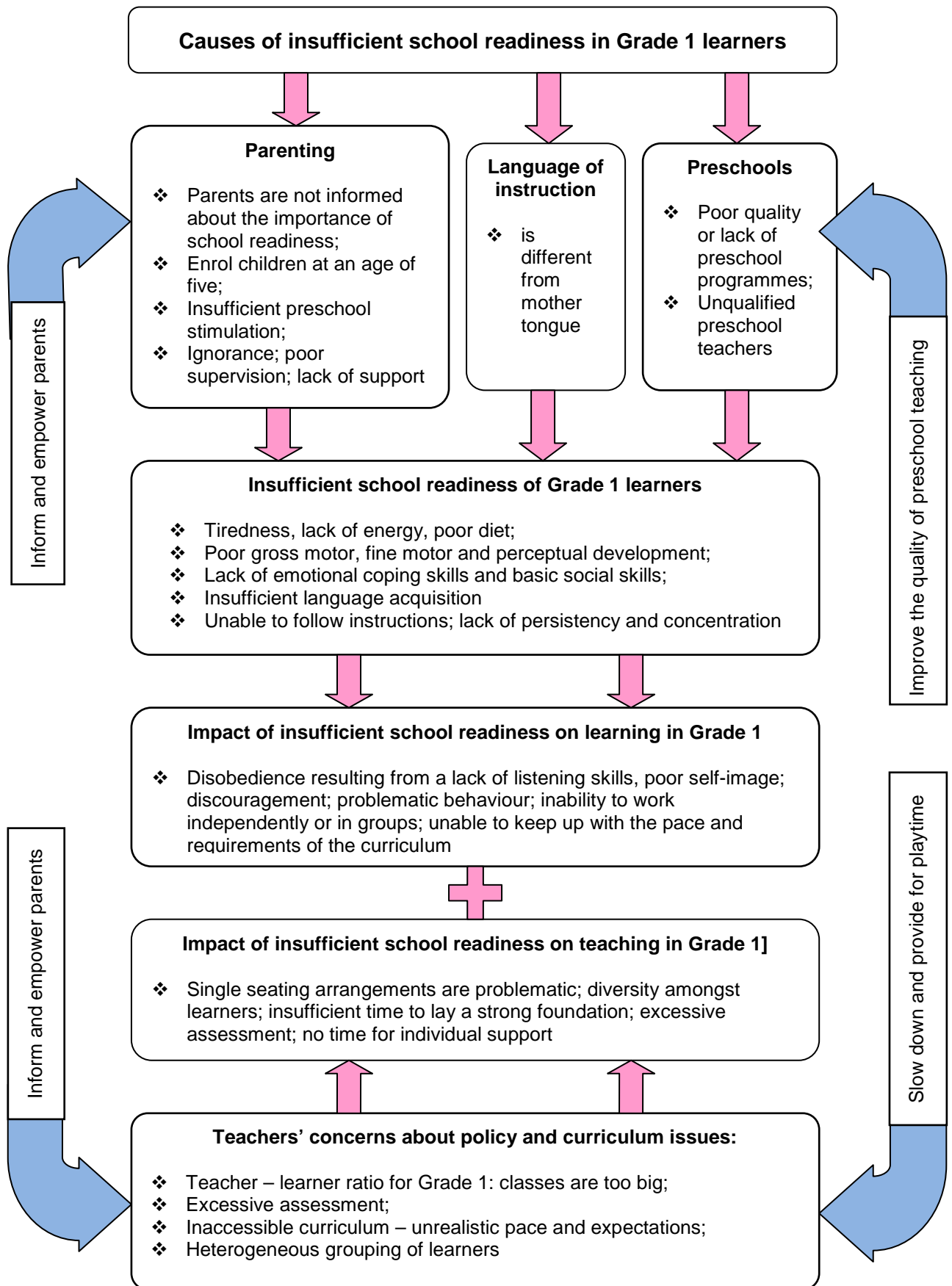


Figure 5.1: A model on the impact of insufficient school readiness on teaching and learning in Grade 1

Figure 5.1 serves as a visual orientation of the research findings. The experiences of the Grade 1 teachers in this study regarding the insufficient school readiness of their learners and the factors they regard as the most important causes thereof are presented in Figure 5.1. The main concerns they have about the implementation of the curriculum and the fact that the learners are unable to keep up with the pace and the requirements of the curriculum are indicated, as well as the effect thereof on teaching and learning in the classroom. The suggestions made by the teachers concerning the parents, preschool teaching, policy issues and the curriculum are also presented (see blue arrows).

In the following section the impact of insufficient school readiness on teaching and learning in Grade 1 is discussed by comparing the research findings of this study to the literature on school readiness (see section 5.2). Thereafter the research findings are presented through the lens of the ecological theory of Bronfenbrenner, which served as theoretical framework for this study (see section 5.3).

5.2 THE IMPACT OF INSUFFICIENT SCHOOL READINESS ON TEACHING AND LEARNING IN GRADE 1

When comparing my findings to the literature on school readiness research I realise that the experiences and concerns of my participants about the insufficient school readiness of their Grade 1 learners are similar to those of teachers and researchers worldwide (see section 2.2). Given the importance of school readiness for long-term academic achievement as pointed out by numerous authors (see section 2.2), a smooth transition from the informal preschool environment to the formal learning environment is essential.

In order to adapt to the formal learning environment and meet the expectations of the learning situation, Grade 1 learners need to be able to pay attention, manage their own behaviour, relate to their teachers and peers and master the new concepts that they are taught (Duncan et al. 2006) (see section 2.2). As mentioned in Chapter 2 five major skill areas which consist of both the cognitive and non-cognitive skills that need to be in place at school entry, were proposed as the criteria for the personal school readiness of the learner by the National Education Goals Panel (NEGP, 1991; Roberts et al. 2011) (see section 2.5). These criteria (referred to by Piotrkowski et al. (2001) as the “personal readiness resources” of the learner) include physical well-

being and motor development; social-emotional development; approaches to learning; language usage and communication skills; as well as cognitive skills and general knowledge (see section 2.3).

In the following section (see section 5.2.1) the experiences and concerns of the teachers in this study, regarding the insufficient school readiness of their learners and the impact thereof on the learning process, are discussed according to the above mentioned criteria for personal school readiness as it was presented in Chapter 2. Thereafter the main causes of insufficient school readiness as seen through the eyes of the teachers in this study (see section 5.2.2) are presented and compared to the findings of previous studies on school readiness as found in the literature. Thirdly the experiences and concerns of the teachers in this study about their responsibility to teach learners with insufficient school readiness are discussed (see section 5.2.3).

According to the teachers in this study the majority of their Grade 1 learners were not at all ready for the demands of the formal learning environment and it was clear to them that these learners had not mastered the above mentioned skills for personal school readiness by the time they entered Grade 1 (see section 4.4.1). What should ideally have been a smooth transition to formal learning, turned out to be a traumatic experience for many of these young learners.

5.2.1 TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES AND CONCERNS ABOUT THE INSUFFICIENT SCHOOL READINESS OF THEIR LEARNERS AND THE IMPACT THEREOF ON THE LEARNING PROCESS

The experiences and concerns of the teachers in this study about the insufficient school readiness of their learners and the impact thereof on the learning process are discussed according to the criteria for the personal school readiness of the learner as proposed by the National Education Goals Panel (NEGP, 1991). These criteria include physical well-being and motor development; social-emotional development; approaches to learning; language usage and communication skills; as well as cognitive skills and general knowledge.

5.2.1.1 Physical well-being and motor development

One of the concerns of the teachers in this study was that the learners are falling asleep in class due to the fact that they have to get up around 4 o'clock in the morning to be on time for school. As a result of being overly tired, they suffer from a lack of energy and are unable to concentrate (see section 4.4.1.3). In this regard Barbarin et al. (2008) as well as Janus and Duku (2010) point out that readiness to learn requires physical health and fitness, including adequate energy levels for classroom and playground activities (see section 2.5.1). Similarly Ravid et al. (2009) found that insufficient sleep results in low energy levels, a shortened attention span, a tendency to fall asleep during class time, mood swings, oppositional behaviour and a lack of motivation. They also pointed out that emotional stability and cognitive functioning will be affected by tiredness (see section 2.5.1).

Most of these issues relate to the learners in this study. Their teachers explained that many of these learners live in rural areas and have to be transported to the urban schools every morning, since their parents believe that they will get a better education in urban schools than in the rural schools. Piotrkowski et al. (2001) claimed that ideally children should attend a local school close to their homes that can provide in all their educational needs (see section 2.3), but for many of the Grade 1 learners in this study this is not possible. Likewise Mistry et al. (2012) state that children from disadvantaged neighbourhoods often have to attend under performing schools (see section 2.4). In an attempt to provide better opportunities for their children, these parents believe that they should send their children to urban schools (see section 4.4.1.4). Ironically the parents do not realise that due to insufficient sleep, their children are not able to benefit from the educational opportunities they are trying to provide for them.

Also, resulting from the fact that the children from rural areas have to leave home very early is the issue of a healthy diet. Most of these children come to school in the morning without having had breakfast. The teachers mentioned that this adds to the learners' low energy levels in the morning. To compensate for the lack of time to prepare breakfast in the morning, the parents give their children money for the tuckshop at school (see section 4.4.1.3). Very few learners use this money to buy something nutritious to eat, which leads to unhealthy eating habits, including lots of sugar and preservatives. This in turn result in more health issues and add to the lack

of concentration in the classroom. As numerous studies have proven, physical health is essential for school readiness and it can therefore be expected that learners who are tired and without energy will not be able to keep up with the pace and requirements of the learning situation and the curriculum (see section 2.5.1).

As far as motor development is concerned, the teachers at both schools in this study mentioned that the gross motor skills of many learners are poorly developed, resulting in low muscle tone and poor balance (see section 4.4.1.3). In this regard Van Biljon and Longhurst (2011) pointed out that children with poorly developed gross motor skills will find it difficult to cope with writing, sitting up and being alert in the classroom (see section 2.5.1). According to their teachers many learners' fine motor skills are also poorly developed, causing them to struggle with colouring in and cutting activities which will in turn, result in a slow work tempo and work that is incomplete and untidy (see section 4.4.1.3). This can lead to the discouragement and poor self image that the teachers observed in many of their learners (see section 4.4.4.3). Correspondingly Janus et al. (2010) stress the fact that failure in the classroom results in a loss of confidence which negatively influences academic progress (see section 2.2). Pienaar et al. (2011) confirm that motor development and cognitive development are fundamentally interrelated, which further explains why these learners are struggling to meet the demands of the curriculum (see section 2.5.1).

5.2.1.2 Emotional well-being and social competence

Emotional readiness at school entry implies that the learner should be able to deal with, regulate and appropriately express own emotions, as well as respond appropriately to the feelings of others (Barbarin et al. 2008; Janus & Duku, 2010). In addition McClelland and Morrison (2003) mention independence, responsibility and self-regulation as important social-emotional skills for school readiness (see section 2.5.2). From my research findings it is clear that the majority of the learners in my study did not master the emotional skills they need to successfully cope with the formal learning situation. The teachers are concerned about the fact that their learners are not able to work independently. They also mentioned that their learners are not able to take care of their belongings, resulting in the loss of stationery, teaching aids and books (see section 4.4.1.4). According to the teachers the learners feel helpless and start crying when they cannot find their belongings, which is a clear

indication of their insufficient emotional readiness in dealing with the demands of the learning situation. Many of these learners were enrolled for Grade 1 at an age of five, turning six before the end of June (see section 4.4.2.2), which is allowed by the law, but not always in the best interest of these young learners. Graziano et al. (2007) claim that insufficient emotional readiness at school entry may negatively affect learning directly by limiting the learners' ability to pay attention and indirectly by causing disruptive behaviour (see section 2.5.2), either of which will add to the learners' inability to keep up with the pace and the requirements of the curriculum.

Bulotsky-Shearer et al. (2008) explain that the social skills needed for a successful entrance to the formal learning environment in Grade 1, include the ability to obey class rules, form friendships and adhere to the social expectations of the learning situation (see section 2.5.2). In addition Farver et al. (2006) mention the ability to cooperate, communicate effectively and follow directions (see section 2.5.2). In my study I found that the teachers experience the social development of their learners as insufficient, since they are unable to listen to and follow instructions (see section 4.4.1.2). The teachers are concerned about the fact that basic skills which the learners should have mastered before entering Grade 1, are not in place. They mentioned that the learners are unable to sit on their chairs when expected to, listen when the teachers are talking, stand or walk in a line or follow simple instructions like 'take out your book' (see section 4.4.1.2). In this regard Bierman et al. (2008) as well as Romano et al. (2010) state that learners should be able to remain seated when expected to, control their own behaviour and not disrupt the learning process (see section 2.5.2).

As a result of the lack of social skills, the teachers I interviewed experience their learners as disobedient and disruptive (see section 4.4.1.2). They feel that they have to spend a lot of time trying to teach the learners basic social skills, resulting in a loss of teaching time. This has a tiring effect on the teachers as they have indicated when saying: "Look at us, we are tired and it is only Monday" (see section 4.4.3.1). They pointed out that the learners are unable to work in groups (a skill that is expected of them) as a result of their inability to pay attention, follow instructions and obey class rules (see section 4.4.3.3). The teachers indicated that they would prefer single seating arrangements for some of the learners, but it is not always practical (see section 4.4.3.2). Romano et al. (2010) confirm that a lack of social skills can lead to

behaviour that disrupts the learning process and results in negative relationships with teachers and peers. Furthermore Hindman et al. (2009) refer to a study where teachers indicated children's social competence, and more specifically the ability to control their own behaviour and attention, cooperate with teachers and peers and learn from and with others, as the most important school readiness skills for children in the early grades (see section 2.5.2). It is clear from the experiences of the teachers concerning teaching and learning in their classrooms that many of the learners in my study lack the social-emotional learning (SEL) competencies mentioned by Denham and Brown (2010) (see Table 2.1).

5.2.1.3 Approaches to learning

As explained in Chapter 2, approaches to learning include the ability to work independently and focus on the task at hand (Pagani et al. 2010; Vitiello et al. 2011); being attentive and persistent while engaging in learning activities (Li-Grining et al. 2010); being willing to accept challenges (Van Zyl, 2004) and the ability to control own emotions and behaviour (Li-Grining et al. 2010). These skills can be seen as the ideal learning-related behaviour while engaging in classroom activities (Vitiello et al. 2011) (see section 2.5.3). In this study however, the opposite is evident when looking at the learning behaviour of the learners through the eyes of their teachers. The majority of these learners are unable to work independently or focus on their work. They struggle to concentrate, are unable to regulate their own emotions and behaviour and lack the persistence to complete learning tasks (see section 4.4.1).

Chen et al. (2011) propose that approaches to learning are mastered as learners engage in classroom activities and react positively to the demands of the formal learning environment (see section 2.5.3). Similarly Duncan et al. (2006) explain that staying focused for longer, leads to prolonged engagement in learning activities, resulting in better academic achievement (see section 2.5.3). In other words approaches to learning are gained through a process of growth while taking part in the learning process. Looking at my research findings, I realise that this process is not possible in classrooms where learners lack school readiness skills. These learners do not benefit from the learning activities in the classroom because they are not ready to engage in the activities in the first place, which leads to repeated failure

and explains the discouragement and poor self image mentioned by their teachers (see section 4.4.4).

5.2.1.4 Language usage and communication skills

One of the main areas of concern for the teachers in this study is the level of language acquisition of their learners. They explained that English (the language of instruction) is not the mother tongue of the learners and therefore the majority of their learners do not understand English when they enter Grade 1 (see sections 4.4.1.1 and 4.4.2.1). Although the teachers of School 2 experience an improvement in the level of language acquisition of their learners due to the excellent work of their Grade R teachers (see section 4.4.1.1), they still feel that formal instruction is delayed because of the limited language usage and communication skills of their learners. The learners are unable to follow instructions and do not understand the work that is presented to them. This is yet another reason why the learners are unable to keep up with the pace and requirements of the curriculum.

The importance of well developed communication skills in the language of instruction is emphasised by numerous authors (Lessing & De Witt, 2005; Castro et al. 2011; Prior et al. 2011) (see section 2.5.5). According to these authors learners need to have a rich vocabulary of the language of instruction and the ability to express their thoughts fluently in order to benefit from formal teaching in Grade 1. For Roberts et al (2011) the ability to understand the content that is presented and the ability to communicate effectively in the classroom are both essential skills for learning readiness (see section 2.5.5). In addition Bierman et al. (2008) as well as Hindman et al. (2009) state that the ability to understand oral instructions depend on well-developed oral language skills (see section 2.5.5). Considering the importance of sufficient language acquisition for success in the classroom, it is clear why the learners in my study are struggling to cope in the formal learning environment. Many of them have not mastered any of the above mentioned skills in the language of instruction, and yet they are confronted with the Grade 1 curriculum of which they have no understanding.

5.2.1.5 Cognitive skills and general knowledge

Bierman et al. (2008) distinguish between two aspects of cognitive development that are important for school readiness (see section 2.5.4). The first aspect consists of the learner's academic knowledge which depends on the quality of preschool stimulation and/or instruction he/she was exposed to as well as the ability to acquire new knowledge in the formal learning environment. According to the teachers in this study the majority of their learners did not attend preschools with well qualified teachers and good quality preschool programmes (see section 4.4.2.4). Furthermore the teachers mentioned that the parents are uninformed about the different aspects of school readiness, the importance thereof and the expectations their children are faced with once they enter Grade 1 (see section 4.4.2.3). Due to this lack of stimulation and/or preschool instruction, the majority of these learners did not obtain the essential cognitive skills needed at school entry and as a result, are unable to acquire the new knowledge presented to them. In this regard Welsh et al. (2012) and Vitiello et al. (2011) explain that cognitive development is often delayed when children grow up in environments deprived from stimulating learning opportunities, which according to Bierman et al. (2008) results in insufficient self-regulation and an inability to pay attention (see section 2.5.4). This explains why the learners in this study experience problems with adjustment and learning in the formal Grade 1 environment and are unable to benefit from the learning opportunities that are available to them.

The second aspect of cognitive development mentioned by Bierman et al. (2008) consists of the executive functions namely working memory, inhibitory control and cognitive flexibility (see section 2.5.4). According to McClelland et al. (2007) learners with well-developed working memory will be able to follow directions and keep instructions in mind while completing learning tasks (see section 2.5.4). One of the main concerns of the teachers in this study was that their learners are unable to follow instructions, work independently and complete learning tasks (see sections 4.4.1.2 and 4.4.1.4). Inhibitory control enables a learner to focus on the task at hand and control his/her own behaviour according to the social expectations of the situation (Diamond et al. 2007) (see section 2.5.4). The teachers in this study experience their learners as disobedient and unable to concentrate, work with their peers in small groups or obey class rules (see sections 4.4.3.1 and 4.4.3.3). Vitiello

et al. (2011) point out that cognitive flexibility activates more positive approaches to learning, for example attentiveness, persistency, willingness to accept challenges and the ability to control own emotions and behaviour (see section 2.5.4). The findings of this study however, indicate that these learners did not obtain cognitive flexibility yet, as pointed out before (see section 5.2.1.3).

According to Roberts et al. (2011) executive functions develop through biological maturation, but are also strengthened by preschool stimulation and learning opportunities (see section 2.5.4). As mentioned before, many of the learners in this study entered Grade 1 at an age of five and might not have been ready for the cognitive demands of the formal learning environment due to cognitive immaturity (see section 4.4.2.2). Van Zyl (2011a:83) defines school maturity as a “biological and neurological process of growth that cannot be forced or accelerated” due to each child’s unique tempo of growth and development (see section 1.5.1). This neurological immaturity, together with the lack of preschool stimulation and instruction explain why the learners in this study have not yet obtained these much needed cognitive skills. Welsh et al. (2010) state that social competence and self-regulation are fostered by these executive functions and enable learners to successfully engage in learning activities with their teachers and peers (see section 2.5.4). This explains a great deal about the traumatic impact of the learners’ insufficient school readiness on their learning process and the concerns of their teachers in this regard.

Lessing (2010) states that teachers are overwhelmed by the demands of highly vulnerable children which put them under a lot of pressure to meet the diverse needs of these learners (see section 2.4). All the above mentioned aspects of the insufficient school readiness of the learners in my study emphasise the vulnerability and diverse needs of these learners. This explains the concerns of the teachers, their stressful working conditions, as well as the disillusionment of the three young teachers at School 2 (see section 4.5).

5.2.2 THE CAUSES OF INSUFFICIENT SCHOOL READINESS OF GRADE 1 LEARNERS THROUGH THE EYES OF THEIR TEACHERS

As mentioned in Chapter 2, in reviewing the literature for factors that contribute to young children’s unpreparedness for formal learning, it was clear that poverty and

deprivation play a significant role in causing insufficient school readiness. Numerous authors (see section 2.3) emphasise the fact that the effect of the neighbourhood or community on the school readiness of the child should not be underestimated. The majority of children in South Africa are still affected by poverty (UNICEF, 2009) and live in communities where they are exposed to malnutrition, crime and a lack of preschool stimulation (UNICEF, 2009) (see section 2.4). This is true for the majority of the learners in this study. Many of these learners come from rural areas and, as mentioned before, are transported to the urban schools because their parents are trying to provide better educational opportunities for them. Even though most of the parents in this case have jobs and earn a steady income, they come from disadvantaged backgrounds themselves, resulting in a lack of knowledge about child rearing, child development and appropriate preschool stimulation.

During the interviews with the Grade 1 teachers in this study, three factors were mentioned which they regard as the main causes for the insufficient school readiness of their learners, namely ignorant parenting, poor quality preschools and the language of instruction (see Figure 5.1).

5.2.2.1 Ignorant parenting

According to the teachers in this study, the parents of their Grade 1 learners are not properly informed about the criteria for school readiness or the importance thereof at school entry. One of the main concerns mentioned by the teachers is the fact that many parents enrol their children for Grade 1 at an age of five, despite being advised against it (see section 4.4.2.2). The parents of these young learners do not understand the importance of school maturity as prerequisite for school readiness, due to their lack of knowledge about child development. As mentioned before, school readiness is not possible without school maturity, which is a biological as well as neurological growth process that cannot be accelerated (Van Zyl, 2011a; Robert et al. 2011) (see section 1.5.1). According to some of the teachers in my study, the parents are unaware of the requirements of the formal learning environment and seem to believe that their children will cope, once given the opportunity to proof themselves.

5.2.2.2 Poor quality preschools

The importance of preschool stimulation and the creating of learning opportunities for the preschool child cannot be over emphasised. Magnuson et al. (2004) point out that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are often deprived from exposure to appropriate stimulation and learning experiences, which are necessary to acquire the language and cognitive skills needed for formal learning (see section 2.5.5). Similarly Al-Hassan and Lansford (2009) argue that rural communities provide a less stimulating environment than urban areas, without the qualities needed to foster school readiness (see section 2.4).

The teachers in this study experience their learners as “not at all ready to be here” (S1, P2, 11) and explained that the majority of these learners did not attend good quality preschools. Many of them attended preschools in the rural areas where they live. These preschools are often run by unqualified preschool ‘teachers’ without any knowledge of school readiness (see section 4.4.2.4). According to the Grade 1 teachers the parents hand in report cards from these preschools when they enrol their children for Grade 1, which state that the child has ‘passed’. This misleads the parents into thinking that their children are ready for formal learning, which explains why they are reluctant to follow the advice of the primary school not to enrol their children prematurely. The majority of these parents are unaware of what should be included in a good quality preschool programme and therefore they are unable to judge the quality of preschools. In this regard Van Biljon and Longhurst (2011) found that many parents assume that school readiness skills develop automatically as children mature, due to a lack of knowledge concerning child development (see section 2.5.1).

One of the suggestions of the teachers in this study was that the parents should be informed about the criteria for school readiness and the demands their children will face once they enter Grade 1. Empowering the parents to create opportunities for preschool stimulation and to judge the quality of preschool programmes can be helpful. Furthermore they mentioned that this could be done through workshops at preschools in the feeding areas of the primary schools (see section 4.4.6.2).

5.2.2.3 Language of instruction

According to the teachers in this study the parents also do not understand the importance of language proficiency as part of school readiness. Many of these learners do not understand a word of English, yet their parents believe that they will cope in a classroom where English is used as the language of instruction. In this regard Prior et al. (2011) state clearly that learners starting school with poorly developed language and communication skills are at serious risk of long-term academic and social difficulties (see section 2.5.5). According to the teachers in this study the parents believe that attending a school where instruction is given in English, will be beneficial for their children, without realising what the effect of failure in the early stages of formal learning can have on the confidence of their children.

Hojnoski and Missall (2006) claim that young children who experience learning difficulties early in their school career, are at risk of getting caught in a negative cycle of learning problems, antisocial behaviour and withdrawal from the school environment (see section 1.1). According to the teachers in this study the first signs of this negative cycle are already visible in the discouragement, poor self-image and disruptive behaviour they observe in their learners (see section 4.4.4).

One of the teachers mentioned that the parents of these children seem to be under the impression that if they can only manage to get their children to a good quality urban school at 7:30 each morning, everything will work out fine. As a result, these young children are dropped off at school in the morning without having had breakfast or enough sleep, without the essential school readiness skills and completely unprepared for the demands of the Grade 1 learning situation that awaits them. Janus and Duku (2010) mention that children from disadvantaged backgrounds will most likely be vulnerable by the time they enter school and Azzi-Lessing (2010) states that due to inadequate emotional, social, language and cognitive development, these children are not ready for formal learning (see section 2.4).

5.2.3 TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES AND CONCERNS ABOUT TEACHING LEARNERS WITH INSUFFICIENT SCHOOL READINESS

5.2.3.1 Inaccessible curriculum – unrealistic pace and expectations

The predominant concern of the Grade 1 teachers at both schools in this study is that their learners are not ready for the current curriculum. They feel that the curriculum is inaccessible and that the pace and expectations are unrealistic (see section 4.4.5). Since there is a lot of pressure on the teachers to implement the curriculum and adhere to the strict time schedule in order to have their learners ready for the Annual National Assessment in September (see section 4.4.5.3), they have no choice but to start with the formal work even though they know that their learners are not at all ready for it.

McGettigan and Gray (2012:16) define school readiness as “a multidimensional construct that incorporates all aspects of a child’s life that contribute directly to that child’s ability to learn” (see section 2.3). Roberts et al. (2011) confirm this and emphasise that these aspects include schools that are ready to accommodate learners with diverse needs (see section 2.3). This means that the school, and by implication the people responsible for compiling the curriculum, should be flexible and prepared to adapt the curriculum according to their learners’ needs. In this regard Piotrkowski et al. (2001) state that schools have a responsibility to provide positive learning environments as well as positive learning experiences for their learners (see section 2.3).

This is clearly not the case at the two schools in this study. The teachers are doing everything within their power to accommodate their Grade 1’s. As mentioned in Chapter 4, the Grade 1 classrooms at both schools are all beautifully decorated and turned into rich learning environments in order to provide the learners with as much stimulation as possible (see section 4.2). The Grade 1 teachers are well qualified and it was clear that they work hard and are dedicated to their careers. Unfortunately they are not allowed to change school policies or the curriculum themselves to meet the needs of their learners (see section 4.4.5). In this regard Vitiello et al. (2012) emphasise that in order to minimise the risk of failure for vulnerable learners in the formal learning environment, the teacher needs to adapt the expectations as well as the curriculum according to the diverse needs of the learners, implying that she

knows and respects the background of each learner. Furthermore the classroom instruction should be adapted to meet the needs of individual learners and the strengths, abilities and characteristics of every individual learner should be recognised (see section 2.5.2).

During the interviews with the teachers, it was clear that they are well aware of these issues. They have a very good understanding of the vulnerability of their learners. They see their learners struggling, getting discouraged and in some cases crying when they are unable to meet the demands of the formal learning situation (see section 4.4.4). They see the damage that is being done to the confidence of the majority of their learners. This leaves them feeling helpless and frustrated. The teachers indicated that if they were allowed to choose, they would prefer to start with a learning readiness programme for the first quarter of the year in order to improve the levels of school readiness of their learners (see section 4.4.63). They are convinced that slowing down the pace and providing for playtime, which includes practical learning experiences, would be a better option (see section 4.4.6.4). If so many research studies worldwide have proven the necessity of adapting the curriculum in order to support vulnerable learners, why are teachers in the South African context not allowed the freedom to do so?

5.2.3.2 Policy issues: teacher – learner ratio

As far as the school policies are concerned, the teachers pointed out that due to the teacher-learner ratio they have 27 to 30 learners per Grade 1 class, which would be fine if all the learners were ready for formal learning. In this case, however the majority of learners are not ready for formal learning, which means that more individual attention is needed (see sections 4.4.3.2 and 4.4.5.4). Graziano et al. (2007) point out that due to the teacher-learner ratio, the Grade 1 classroom is characterised by an increased emphasis on independent functioning and decreased support when compared to the preschool or home environment (see section 2.5.2). This is the opposite of what is needed in a Grade 1 classroom where the majority of learners are suffering from insufficient school readiness. The teachers feel that there is no time to provide individual support to learners who are struggling, nor is there time to lay a strong foundation through the consolidation of new concepts (see sections 4.4.5.2 and 4.4.5.4). They suggested that smaller classes would be a great help, but this decision is not theirs to make.

5.2.3.3 Policy issues: heterogeneous grouping of learners

Another school policy which the teachers in this study would like to change if only they had the power to do so is the policy on heterogeneous grouping of learners. They explained that the diversity amongst their learners is so vast, that it becomes impossible to address the individual needs of learners (see section 4.4.3.4). The learners with insufficient school readiness need a slow working tempo, with additional work on a concrete level as well as individual support, while the learners who are ready for the formal work are able to keep up with the pace and requirements of the curriculum. According to the teachers, the stronger learners become bored when their classmates struggle and this often leads to disruptive behaviour (see section 4.4.3.4). They suggest homogeneous grouping of their learners according to either school readiness levels or proficiency in the language of instruction. This would enable them to work at a comfortable pace that would suit all the learners in the class and they would be able to prepare their lessons according to the learning abilities of their learners (see section 4.4.6.3).

5.2.3.4 Excessive assessment

Excessive assessment is another concern of the teachers in this study. According to them they have to spend a lot of teaching time on formal assessment, which sometimes have to be done on a daily basis (see section 4.4.5.3). Besides the fact that it is very tiring for the learners, they are also concerned about the repeated experiences of failure as the majority of the learners are not able to perform these assessment tasks. Here again the teachers have to do what is expected of them, and not what they believe is in the best interest of their learners.

The literature clearly emphasises the responsibility of the teachers to adapt the curriculum, their teaching methods and the assessment strategies to meet the diverse needs of their learners (see sections 2.3 and 2.5.2). This is in accordance with the policy for inclusive education as stated in Education White Paper 6, namely that inclusive education is about “changing attitudes, behaviour, teaching methodologies, curricula and the environment to meet the needs of all learners” (Department of Education, 2001). Furthermore it is stated in Education White Paper 6 that inclusive education is about “maximising the participation of all learners in the culture and the curricula of educational institutions and uncovering and minimising

barriers to learning (Department of Education, 2001). Looking at my research findings, it seems as if the inaccessible curriculum, excessive assessment of the learners and the policies on teacher-learner ratios and heterogeneous grouping of learners are in fact creating barriers to learning.

Questions that come to mind are: Why is there a disparity between the policy for inclusive education and the expectations of the Department of Education when it comes to implementing the curriculum and school policies in classrooms where vulnerable learners need support? What is the sense in pressurising teachers into implementing an inflexible curriculum against their better judgement? Why are the policy makers and curriculum writers not listening to the voices of the teachers who are the experts in teaching vulnerable learners in Grade 1? Why are educational authorities ignoring the urgency of the wakeup call they get through the alarming results of the Annual National Assessment (see section 1.1)? What would it take to bring about a change?

5.3 RESEARCH FINDINGS THROUGH THE LENS OF BRONFENBRENNER'S ECOLOGICAL THEORY

At this point stepping back and looking at my research findings holistically through the lens of my theoretical framework (see section 2.3) will assist me in wrapping up the interpretation thereof. The ecological theory of Bronfenbrenner makes it possible to look at the life-world of a child as a whole, including all the different aspects that influence the development and learning process of the child (Cushon et al. 2011; Chan, 2012). This theory was adapted to serve as a theoretical framework for the purpose of this study (see Figure 2.1) by setting the focus on the preschool development of the child and the transition to the formal learning environment in Grade 1, during the post-apartheid era in South Africa. Figure 5.2 (see next page) illustrates the life-world of the majority of the Grade 1 learners in my study, according to the research findings.

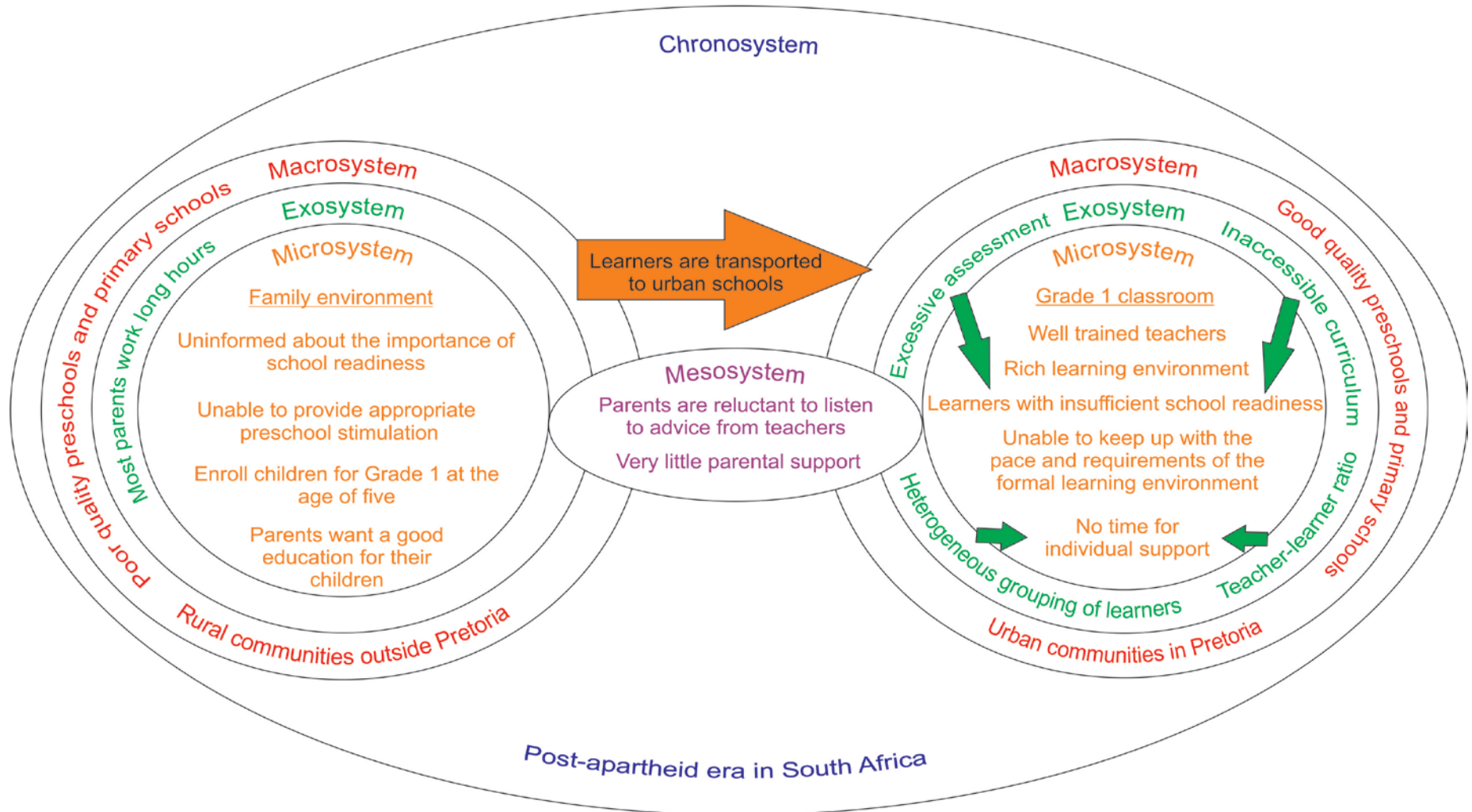


Figure 5.2: Research findings through the lens of the ecological theory of Bronfenbrenner (adapted for the purpose of this study)

The chronosystem represents the post-apartheid era in South Africa, which is characterised by economical as well as educational transformation. Since the majority of the Grade 1 learners in this study live in rural areas with their parents, but attend urban schools, I have decided to illustrate the home environment and the school environment separately (see Figure 5.2) in order to emphasise the contrast between the rural communities and the urban communities with regard to the micro-, exo- and macrosystems. As indicated by the research findings, these two environments in which the majority of the Grade 1 learners in this study live and learn are worlds apart from each other and seem to be incompatible.

In the rural communities where the majority of these children live (see Figure 5.2), the macrosystem is characterised by families from disadvantaged backgrounds who are working long hours (exosystem) in an attempt to improve their living conditions and provide good educational opportunities for their children. Unfortunately the quality of the preschools in the rural areas is poor, leading to insufficient school readiness by the time the children enter Grade 1. The parents themselves come from disadvantaged backgrounds and are unable to provide their children with appropriate preschool stimulation (microsystem). They are uninformed about the importance of school readiness and enrol their children for Grade 1 prematurely. Since these parents want to provide the best possible educational opportunities for their children, they prefer to send them to urban schools to which they have to be transported on a daily basis.

In the urban communities of Pretoria where the Grade 1 learners in my study attend school (see Figure 5.2) the macrosystem is characterised by good quality preschools and primary schools with well trained teachers. The teachers in my study are dedicated to their careers and have a passion for the young children they work with (microsystem). Unfortunately the children are unable to benefit from the educational opportunities available to them in these rich learning environments, since they lack the necessary school readiness skills and are unable to keep up with the pace and the requirements of the formal learning environment (microsystem). The teachers are convinced that the curriculum is inaccessible and are concerned about the fact that the teacher-learner ratio and heterogeneous grouping of the learners make individual support impossible (exosystem). They are also concerned about the excessive assessment expected by the Department of Education (exosystem) and the effect of

academic failure on the self-confidence of their learners. The teachers experience that the parents are reluctant to listen to them when they advise them against the premature enrolment of their children, as well as a lack of parental support during the Grade 1 year (mesosystem).

5.4 CONCLUSION

Through following the steps recommended by Creswell (2008) and Nieuwenhuis (2007) namely to conduct a further thematic analysis of my findings by layering and interconnecting the themes in order to look for relations between the themes and presenting it visually, as well as comparing the findings with past research in the literature in the form of a narrative discussion, I have reached an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon I set out to investigate.

Since the aim of this study was to investigate the experiences and concerns of Grade 1 teachers regarding the impact of insufficient school readiness on teaching and learning in their classrooms, the focus of the empirical study was on the voices of the Grade 1 teachers who took part in the study. It was interesting to see that their experiences regarding the insufficient school readiness of many of their learners correspond with the findings of research on school readiness worldwide. The fact however, that the teachers are pressurised into implementing a curriculum which they find inaccessible is a cause for concern and the effect thereof on their learners who are unable to keep up with the pace and the requirements is upsetting. Does this mean that our schools are not ready to support learners with insufficient school readiness?

Further research needs to be done urgently in order to investigate the discrepancy there seems to be between the policy of inclusive education and the way teachers are expected to implement the curriculum. Furthermore interviewing the parents of these Grade 1 learners will lead to a better understanding of their perceptions and expectations of their children's transition to the formal learning environment. It would also shed light on their perceptions about their role and responsibility in supporting their children in this process.

I have gained a clear picture of the insufficient school readiness of the Grade 1 learners, as well as the insufficient readiness of the schools in supporting these

learners through the eyes of my participants. In Chapter 6 I state my research conclusions by answering the initial research questions, followed by recommendations on policy, practice and further research. I trust that the recommendations emanating from my study will make a difference in the lives of these Grade 1 learners and their caring teachers.

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CHAPTER 6

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 INTRODUCTION

In Chapter 5 the research findings of this study were discussed with reference to the research aim and the relevant literature on school readiness research in an attempt to uncover the meaning of the empirical research findings. The experiences and concerns of the teachers in this study, regarding the insufficient school readiness of their learners and the impact it has on the learning process, were discussed according to the criteria for personal school readiness as these were presented in Chapter 2 (see section 5.2.1). Thereafter the main causes of insufficient school readiness as seen through the eyes of the teachers in this study were presented and compared to the findings of previous studies on school readiness as found in the literature (see section 5.2.2). Thirdly the experiences of the teachers in this study about their responsibility to teach learners with insufficient school readiness and their concerns about implementing the curriculum were discussed (see section 5.2.3). Finally the research findings were interpreted through the lens of the ecological theory of Bronfenbrenner, which was adapted and used as a theoretical framework for this study.

The purpose of Chapter 6 is to conclude the study by presenting a brief summary of the literature on school readiness research (Chapter 2) and the empirical research findings of this study (Chapter 4). Similarities and possible contradictions between the literature and the empirical research findings of this study, as discussed in Chapter 5, will be briefly summarised. Subsequently conclusions will be drawn by firstly answering the secondary research questions and finally the main research question which guided this study. Lastly recommendations will be made for practitioners, policy makers and further research.

6.2 SUMMARY

6.2.1 A SHORT OVERVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ON SCHOOL READINESS RESEARCH

Much research has been done on school readiness because of its importance for a smooth transition from the informal pre-school environment to the formal learning environment in Grade 1. School readiness has a long-term effect on the development of a learner, including academic progress, a successful school career, employment and the ability to contribute to society. The transition to the formal learning environment is seen as one of the most important changes in early childhood, which explains the worldwide emphasis that is being placed on the transition from preschool to Grade 1 (see section 2.2). School readiness is regarded as a multidimensional construct which includes children who are ready to learn, schools that are ready to accommodate learners with diverse needs, as well as parents and communities who support learners' development (see section 2.3).

When children enter the formal learning environment in Grade 1, they are faced with many new expectations. They are expected to work independently, complete learning tasks, follow a strict class routine and acquire literacy and mathematics skills. The criteria for the personal readiness of the learner at school entry were proposed by the National Education Goals Panel (NEGP, 1991), and include physical well-being and motor development; social-emotional development; approaches to learning; language usage and communication skills; and cognitive skills and general knowledge (see section 2.5).

As learning starts long before school entry, stimulation during the pre-school years should not be underestimated. External factors that have an impact on the personal readiness of the child include the expectations of the parents, the readiness of the school, preschool experiences and the environment of the child. Many studies have proven that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are less ready for formal learning than their more advantaged peers, since they are often deprived from attending good quality preschools. As a result they are at heightened risk for school failure, which has serious and long-lasting consequences (see section 2.4).

Grade 1 teachers have an important responsibility to support such learners. Numerous suggestions were made by authors of school readiness literature (see

section 2.5) on how learners with insufficient school readiness should be supported. These include establishing nurturing relationships with the learners, giving positive feedback and providing stimulating classrooms. Furthermore expectations, teaching strategies, as well as the curriculum should be adapted to suit the individual needs of the learners.

6.2.2 A SHORT OVERVIEW OF THE EMPIRICAL RESEARCH FINDINGS OF THIS STUDY

Focus group interviews with Grade 1 teachers at two selected urban schools in Pretoria revealed that their experiences regarding the insufficient school readiness of their learners are very similar to those of teachers worldwide. According to them the majority of their learners come from rural areas and are not ready for the demands of the formal learning environment. They mentioned that their learners are unable to concentrate in class due to tiredness and a lack of energy. They are unable to follow instructions or pay attention, resulting in disobedience and problematic behaviour. The learners are unable to work independently or in groups due to insufficient social-emotional coping skills. They also lack the physical, cognitive and language skills needed to keep up with the pace and requirements of formal learning and the current curriculum. As a result many of these learners experience discouragement and suffer from a poor self-image (see sections 4.4.1, 4.4.3 and 4.4.4).

Causes for the insufficient school readiness of their learners which were mentioned by the teachers include poor quality preschool stimulation and the fact that the learners are not receiving mother tongue instruction. They are also concerned about the ignorance of the parents regarding school readiness and the importance thereof, as well as the lack of support they receive from the parents as far as homework is concerned. One of their main concerns is the precipitate enrolment of the learners and the fact that the parents are reluctant to listen to advice in this regard (see section 4.4.2).

The predominant concerns of the teachers however, are the unrealistic expectations of the current curriculum and the fact that they are pressurised into implementing it against their better judgement, as well as the excessive assessment that is expected to be done almost on a daily basis. The teachers are unable to lay a strong foundation or support the learners on their level. The inflexible policies regarding teacher-learner ratio and heterogeneous grouping of learners make it impossible to

adapt teaching strategies according to the individual needs of the learners (see section 4.4.5).

In order to improve the current situation, the teachers suggested that the quality of preschool teaching should improve, the parents should be informed about the importance of school readiness and empowered to provide preschool stimulation to their children, the pace and expectations of the curriculum should be reduced and homogeneous grouping of learners should be considered (see section 4.4.6).

6.2.3 SIMILARITIES AND POSSIBLE CONTRADICTIONS BETWEEN THE LITERATURE AND THE EMPIRICAL RESEARCH FINDINGS

Numerous studies were conducted over the years to determine the criteria for school readiness and the factors leading to a lack thereof. Almost all the studies I have reviewed during my literature study were quantitative studies on insufficient school readiness which gave me a clear picture of the complexity and urgency of the issue. I came across quantitative studies where Grade 1 teachers commented on the school readiness skills they regard as the most important for a learner at school entry, but I did not come across any qualitative studies on the experiences of Grade 1 teachers in working with learners with insufficient school readiness and the concerns they have about the progress of these learners. Little seems to be known about the teachers' opinions on this matter.

When I compared my empirical research findings to the findings of previous studies in the literature, I found that the criteria for school readiness mentioned by the teachers in my study correspond with the criteria for the personal readiness of the learner at school entry as proposed by the National Education Goals Panel (NEGP, 1991), namely physical well-being and motor development; social-emotional development; approaches to learning; language usage and communication skills; and cognitive skills and general knowledge (see section 5.2.1). The teachers in my study mentioned similar causes for the insufficient school readiness of their learners. The main cause of insufficient school readiness remains deprivation from preschool stimulation due to a disadvantaged background (see section 5.2.2).

According to the teachers in my study the effect of insufficient school readiness on the learning process of their learners, corresponds with the findings in the literature,

namely poor academic progress, experiences of failure, discouragement, a poor self-esteem and disruptive behaviour (see section 5.2.1).

As far as the insufficient school readiness of the learners is concerned, my research findings correspond with the findings of previous studies in the literature. However, when it comes to the teachers' experiences and concerns about teaching and supporting learners with insufficient school readiness, my research findings seem to break new ground, as I found no evidence of similar research findings in my literature study. The teachers in my study are concerned about being pressurised into implementing an inaccessible curriculum against their better judgement, excessive assessment for which their learners are not ready and policies which prevent them from addressing their learners' diverse needs (namely the current teacher-learner ratio and heterogeneous grouping of learners). As mentioned in Chapter 5, there seems to be a discrepancy between the policy for inclusive education and the expectations of the Department of Education when it comes to implementing the curriculum and school policies in classrooms where learners who are vulnerable due to insufficient school readiness, need support (see section 5.2.3). Since I did not find any evidence of similar research findings in the international literature, it might be unique to the South African context. Looking at South African studies, it seems as if Grade 1 teachers very seldom get the opportunity to express their concerns about this issue.

6.3 RESEARCH CONCLUSIONS

The final conclusions of this study will be drawn by answering the research questions which guided my study, namely:

Main research question

How do Grade 1 teachers experience the impact of insufficient school readiness on teaching and learning in their classrooms and what are their concerns regarding this issue?

Secondary research questions

- What are the criteria for school readiness according to the literature on school readiness?

- How do teachers experience the school readiness of their learners when they enter Grade 1?
- What do Grade 1 teachers regard as important causes of insufficient school readiness?
- What are Grade 1 teachers' perceptions about the impact of insufficient school readiness on the teaching and learning process in their classes?
- How do Grade 1 teachers experience the implementation of the curriculum with regard to learners with insufficient school readiness?

I will proceed by first providing answers to the secondary research questions, which will subsequently lead to answering the main research question.

6.3.1 Secondary research question no. 1

- ❖ **What are the criteria for school readiness according to the literature on school readiness?**

According to the literature on school readiness the personal school readiness of the learner at school entry entails more than just academic skills. Although children start the formal learning process in Grade 1 with specific academic skills, their ability to apply these skills in learning is essential for their overall progress. Non-cognitive skills are therefore just as important as cognitive skills. Teachers tend to put more emphasis on the non-cognitive skills and view the personal readiness of learners in terms of attitude towards learning, behaviour and the skills needed to meet the social demands of the formal learning environment as essential for formal learning, while communication skills and good health are also regarded as important for school readiness. The criteria for the personal readiness of the learner at school entry were proposed by the National Education Goals Panel (NEGP, 1991), and include physical well-being and motor development; social-emotional development; approaches to learning; language usage and communication skills; and cognitive skills and general knowledge (see section 2.5).

The fact that school readiness is regarded as a multi-dimensional construct which, apart from the personal readiness of the learner, also includes the readiness of the school to support learners according to their diverse needs and the responsibility of

the community to provide the necessary preschool stimulation and support, should not be overlooked (see section 2.3).

6.3.2 SECONDARY RESEARCH QUESTION NO. 2

❖ How do teachers experience the school readiness of their learners when they enter Grade1?

According to the teachers in this study the majority of their Grade 1 learners were not at all ready for the demands of the formal learning environment and it was clear that they had not mastered the above mentioned skills for personal school readiness by the time they entered Grade 1. The teachers mentioned that many learners suffer from a lack of energy and are unable to concentrate, due to tiredness. The fact that their fine motor skills are poorly developed, causes them to struggle with colouring, cutting and pasting, which means that they are not ready to start with formal writing. Many of the learners lack emotional readiness and start crying as a result of the pressure in class.

As far as socialising and group work is concerned, many of them are unable to share, take turns or work in groups. They lack listening skills and the ability to follow basic instructions, which often lead to disruptive behaviour. Since the language of instruction is English and the majority of the learners are second language learners, they are unable to understand the teacher due to insufficient language acquisition (see sections 4.4.1 and 4.4.3). At both schools the teachers experienced the level of school readiness of their learners as inadequate.

6.3.3 SECONDARY RESEARCH QUESTION NO. 3

❖ What do Grade 1 teachers regard as important causes of insufficient school readiness?

During the interviews with the Grade 1 teachers in this study, three factors were mentioned which they regard as the main causes for the insufficient school readiness of their learners, namely ignorant parenting, poor quality preschools and the language of instruction (see section 5.2.2). In the first place, the majority of these learners come from rural areas and even though most of their parents have jobs and earn a steady income, they come from disadvantaged backgrounds themselves,

resulting in a lack of knowledge about child rearing, child development and appropriate preschool stimulation. According to the teachers in this study, these parents are not properly informed about the criteria for school readiness or the importance thereof at school entry. Many parents enrol their children for Grade 1 at an age of five, despite being advised against it, because they do not understand the importance of school maturity as prerequisite for school readiness.

Secondly, many of the learners in this study either did not attend preschools, or attended preschools in rural areas which are run by unqualified people who are not aware of the requirements of the formal learning environment for which they should prepare the preschool children. Furthermore the report cards issued by these preschools state that the learners have 'passed', misleading the parents into thinking that their children are ready for Grade 1.

In the third place, the learners in this study do not receive mother tongue instruction and many of them do not understand a word of English when they enter school. They are not exposed to English at home and in many cases the parents are unable to support them in this regard. Good quality schools where these learners can receive mother tongue instruction are not available yet.

All three issues mentioned as causes for the insufficient school readiness of the learners in this study, resulted from decades of poverty and deprivation in the rural communities of South Africa.

6.3.4 SECONDARY RESEARCH QUESTION NO. 4

❖ **What are Grade 1 teachers' perceptions about the impact of insufficient school readiness on the teaching and learning process in their classes?**

According to teachers in this study the majority of their learners are not ready for the demands of the formal learning environment, which means that the teaching and learning process cannot commence as planned by the teachers or expected by the Department of Education. Many learners do not understand the language of instruction and therefore the teaching and learning process is slowed down. No formal learning is possible without adequate language acquisition. The teachers

mentioned that their learners are unable to concentrate in class due to tiredness and a lack of energy, resulting in incomplete tasks and learning failure. The learners are unable to listen to or follow instructions, leading to disobedience and behaviour that disrupts the class routine. This has a tiring effect on the teachers and a lot of their teaching time is spent on teaching their learners basic social skills that should already have been in place. The learners are unable to work independently, which means that the teachers never get the opportunity to work with a small group or one learner individually. Group work is not possible due to the insufficient social-emotional coping skills of the learners. An overall lack of school readiness skills causes an inability to keep up with the pace and demands of formal learning and the requirements of the current curriculum. As a result many of the learners experience discouragement and suffer from a poor self-image (see section 5.2.1 for a more detailed discussion).

6.3.5 SECONDARY RESEARCH QUESTION NO. 5

❖ How do Grade 1 teachers experience the implementation of the curriculum with regard to learners with insufficient school readiness?

The predominant concern of the Grade 1 teachers at both schools in this study is that their learners are not ready for the current curriculum. The teachers experience the curriculum as inaccessible and the pace and expectations thereof as unrealistic. They are under a lot of pressure to implement the curriculum and adhere to a strict time schedule in order to have their learners ready for the Annual National Assessment. They have no choice but to start with the formal work even though they know that their learners are not at all ready for it. They see their learners struggling, getting discouraged and in some cases crying when they are unable to keep up with the pace and requirements of the curriculum. They see the damage that is being done to the confidence of many of their learners. This leaves them feeling helpless and frustrated. The teachers indicated that if they could choose, they would prefer to start with a learning readiness programme for the first quarter of the year in order to improve the levels of school readiness of their learners. They would also like to slow down the pace and provide enough time for laying a strong academic foundation. These teachers are well aware of their responsibility to adapt their teaching strategies and the curriculum to meet the needs of their learners in accordance to the

policy of inclusive education, but their hands are tied by the expectations of the educational authorities.

6.3.6 MAIN RESEARCH QUESTION

- ❖ **How do Grade 1 teachers experience the impact of insufficient school readiness on teaching and learning in their classrooms and what are their concerns regarding this issue?**

The Grade 1 teachers of the two selected schools in this study experience the impact of the insufficient school readiness of the majority of their learners, on the learning process and the emotional well-being of their learners as very traumatic for these learners. Instead of a smooth transition from the informal preschool environment to the formal learning environment of the grade 1 classroom, these learners are traumatised by the fact that they cannot keep up with the pace and requirements of the formal learning situation, resulting in experiences of failure, discouragement and a poor self-esteem which, in turn will have a negative long term effect on the academic performance of these learners.

According to the teachers in this study the teaching process is jeopardised by both the insufficient school readiness of the learners and the fact that the schools are not prepared to support these learners by addressing their needs. Even though the teachers are well trained and know exactly what is needed to remedy the situation, they have to adhere to the expectations of educational authorities regarding the implementation of the curriculum, as well as the policies on teacher-learner ratio and heterogeneous grouping of learners. This prevents them from implementing inclusive education by adapting teaching strategies and the curriculum to suit the individual needs of their learners. Their predominant concern is the inaccessibility of the current curriculum for learners with insufficient school readiness.

6.4 RECOMMENDATIONS

With reference to my research findings, the following recommendations can be made for policy makers, practitioners and further research:

6.4.1 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY MAKERS

According to my empirical research findings, there is pressure on Grade 1 teachers to adhere to the policies of teacher-learner ratio and the heterogeneous grouping of Grade 1 learners (see section 4.4.5). Considering the fact that not all Grade 1 learners enter the formal learning environment with the same level of school readiness, the above mentioned policies should be flexible and teachers should be allowed to make changes in the best interest of their learners according to their own judgement.

Similarly, it is clear from my empirical research findings that the current curriculum is being implemented by expecting all learners to work at the same pace and adhere to the same requirements (see section 4.4.5). In other words it seems as if a 'one size fits all' practice is being followed. These expectations contradict the principles of inclusive education as stated in White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001:16), namely that the implementation of the curriculum should be flexible and teachers should have the freedom to adapt teaching strategies and learning content according to the needs of their learners. This discrepancy between the policy of inclusive education and the way teachers are expected to implement the curriculum needs to be investigated urgently. In this regard curriculum writers and education authorities should consult experienced Grade 1 teachers for advice when drafting policy measures on supporting and teaching learners who are vulnerable due to insufficient school readiness.

6.4.2 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS

In the first place it is strongly recommended that Grade 1 teachers make their voices heard and state their concerns about the fact that they experience the current curriculum as inaccessible for the learners who suffer from insufficient school readiness (see section 4.4.5). As it is the responsibility of the class teachers to address the diverse needs of their learners by adapting teaching strategies and learning content (see sections 2.5.2 and 5.2.3) they have to step forward on behalf of their learners when policies and curriculum issues cause learning barriers which jeopardise the teaching and learning process. This can be done by stating their concerns in writing and handing it to the District Based Support Team (DBST) of the district responsible for supporting their schools, as an urgent request for intervention. The School Based Support Team (SBST) should then take the responsibility to follow up their request and monitor the process by staying in contact with the district officials handling the matter.

Another possibility is that the South African Teachers' Union (SAOU) can be contacted to create a forum for Grade 1 teachers where they can voice their concerns.

Secondly it is recommended that Grade 1 teachers prepare a proposal for a learning readiness programme which can be implemented in the first quarter of the Grade 1 year, in order to improve the school readiness level of their learners and submit it to education authorities for approval. As experts in their field, well trained experienced Grade 1 teachers are the most likely to know what it would take to address the issue of insufficient school readiness. A request can be made to one of the universities to conduct a thorough investigation into the development and implementation of such a learning readiness programme, in order to ensure that it is firmly based on empirical research.

In the third place, the recommendation of the teachers in my study in terms of informing and empowering the parents of Grade R and Grade 1 learners about school readiness (see section 4.4.6), is endorsed. In this regard schools should arrange information sessions for parents during which important issues regarding school readiness can be discussed. Parents need to know what the expectations of the formal learning environment are and how to support their children in this regard. Teachers and parents need to work as a team in order to ensure a smooth transition for the Grade 1 learners from the informal preschool environment to the formal learning environment.

6.4.3 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

According to my empirical research findings, Grade 1 teachers are expected to implement the curriculum even though many of their learners lack the necessary school readiness skills and as a result these learners are unable to keep up with the pace and requirements of the formal learning programme (see section 4.4.5). Accordingly it is recommended that a study should be conducted by an Early Childhood Education Department of one of the universities, in collaboration with experienced Grade 1 teachers to investigate the development and implementation of a learning readiness programme which can be used to improve the school readiness levels of learners during the first quarter of their Grade 1 year. The findings of such a study can then be presented to the Department of Education for approval. Permission can be requested to pilot the programme in order to determine the effect thereof on the school readiness of the Grade 1 learners.

Similarly an investigation into the development of a quality preschool programme that will be suitable for implementation in rural areas, as well as the resources needed to put it into practice will be useful in an attempt to improve opportunities for preschool stimulation in these areas. Being aware of the issues regarding insufficient school readiness of Grade 1 learners in South African schools, universities should take the initiative in conducting research in this regard.

6.5 CONCLUDING REMARKS

The purpose of my study was to investigate the experiences and concerns of Grade 1 teachers with regard to the impact of insufficient school readiness on the teaching and learning process in Grade 1. Through conducting an in-depth literature study on school readiness, I came to realise the importance as well as the complexity of school readiness, which provided the framework for collecting, analysing and interpreting my data. The empirical part of my study revealed that the Grade 1 teachers are extremely concerned about the way the curriculum is currently implemented and urgent intervention is needed regarding the support and teaching of learners who are vulnerable due to insufficient school readiness.

Even though my research findings cannot be generalised, it is an empirical fact that there are numerous Grade 1 classes in South Africa with similar circumstances and needs. Literally thousands of Grade 1 learners experience failure on a daily basis in their classrooms. Meier (2013:2) refers to a report by the Department of Education when stating that “grade repetitions were the highest in Grade 1 due to serious deficiencies in school entrants’ learning abilities and unsuitable learning programmes beyond the reach of entrants’ capacity.” Looking at the alarming results of the Annual National Assessment (Department of Education, 2011), I realise that there is a lot to be done. An intervention is urgently needed and the focus should be on preschool stimulation in order to ensure school readiness. In the meantime, the expert advice of our experienced Grade 1 teachers should be followed in supporting the learners who are already struggling in the Grade 1 classrooms. The education authorities should listen to the voices of these teachers, as they are speaking on behalf of their learners who are unable to do so.

‘They expect too much of the children, definitely, too much ... these little ones, it is just not fair’ (School 2, Participant 3).

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A:

Ethical Clearance Certificate

APPENDIX B:

Principals' letter of permission

APPENDIX C:

Teachers' letter of informed consent

APPENDIX D:

Interview schedule

APPENDIX E:

Data: transcribed and arranged according to interview questions

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RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE

CLEARANCE NUMBER :

EC 12/11/02

DEGREE AND PROJECT

MEd

The impact of insufficient school readiness on learning in Grade 1: teachers' experiences and concerns

INVESTIGATOR(S)

Marietjie Bruwer

DEPARTMENT

Early Childhood Education

DATE CONSIDERED

03 February 2014

DECISION OF THE COMMITTEE

APPROVED

Please note:

For Masters applications, ethical clearance is valid for 2 years

For PhD applications, ethical clearance is valid for 3 years.

**CHAIRPERSON OF ETHICS
COMMITTEE**

Prof Liesel Ebersöhn

DATE

03 February 2014

CC

Jeannie Beukes
Liesel Ebersöhn
Dr MG Steyn
Prof CG Hartell

This ethical clearance certificate is issued subject to the following condition:

1. It remains the students' responsibility to ensure that all the necessary forms for informed consent are kept for future queries.

Please quote the clearance number in all enquiries.

APPENDIX B

The Principal
_____ Primary School

Dear Mr _____

Requesting assistance with research on school readiness

I am conducting a study on the impact of insufficient school readiness on learning in Grade 1 and being able to work in collaboration with teachers in the field is very important to me. I would like to interview the Grade 1 teachers at your school, since their participation in this research project can greatly enhance my understanding of the issue under investigation.

The purpose of my study is to explore the experiences and concerns of Grade 1 teachers regarding the progress of learners who are not ready for formal learning due to insufficient school readiness. I would like to conduct a focus group interview with the Grade 1 teachers and in doing so, create an opportunity for them to share their experiences and concerns regarding this issue with me.

Your participation in this research project is voluntary and you are free to decide not to participate or to withdraw at any time. You are welcome to ask questions about the study before participating or during the study and I will be happy to share the findings with you after the research is completed. All participants will remain anonymous. Neither the school, nor the teachers' names will be associated with the research findings in any way, and only the researcher will know identity of the school and the participants. The use of the data will be limited to this research project, as authorised by the University of Pretoria.

Thank you for your interest and participation in this study. I appreciate your time.

Yours sincerely

Mrs M Bruwer marietjie.bruwer@up.ac.za

AGREEMENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

I, _____, hereby agree that the Grade 1 teachers at my school may take part in the research project. I understand that the participation of my staff is voluntary and that they may withdraw at any time. I understand the purpose and procedure of the study.

Principal

Date

PS *You will receive a copy of this letter to keep.*

Grade 1 teachers

_____ Primary School

Dear Grade 1 teacher

Requesting assistance with research on school readiness

As a Grade 1 teacher, you undoubtedly have valuable knowledge and experience in teaching and supporting your Grade 1 learners. I am conducting a study on the impact of insufficient school readiness on learning in Grade 1 and being able to work in collaboration with teachers in the field is very important to me. Your participation in this research project can greatly enhance my understanding of the issue under investigation.

The purpose of my study is to explore the experiences and concerns of Grade 1 teachers regarding the progress of learners who are not ready for formal learning due to insufficient school readiness. I would like to conduct a focus group interview with you and your Grade 1 colleagues and in doing so, create an opportunity for you to share your experiences and concerns regarding this issue with me.

Your participation in this research project is voluntary and you are free to decide not to participate or to withdraw at any time. You are welcome to ask questions about the study before participating or during the study and I will be happy to share the findings with you after the research is completed. All participants will remain anonymous. Your name will not be associated with the research findings in any way, and only the researcher will know your identity. The use of the data will be limited to this research project, as authorised by the University of Pretoria.

Thank you for your interest and participation in this study. I appreciate your time.

Yours sincerely

Mrs M Bruwer marietjie.bruwer@up.ac.za

AGREEMENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

I, _____, hereby agree to take part in the focus group interview. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time. I understand the purpose and procedure of the study.

1 Teacher

Date

Grade

PS *You will receive a copy of this letter to keep.*

APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Primary research question

How do Grade 1 teachers experience the impact of insufficient school readiness on teaching and learning in their classrooms and what are their concerns regarding this issue?

	Focus group 1	Focus group 2
Date	13 th May 2013	20 th May 2013
Time	13:30	14:00
Place	School 1	School 2
Interviewees	2 Grade 1 teachers (Participants 1 and 2)	4 Grade 1 teachers (Participants 3, 4, 5, and 6)

Interview questions

- vii) How do you experience your Grade 1 learners at the beginning of the year regarding their level of readiness for formal learning?
- viii) What do you regard as the main causes of insufficient school readiness?
- ix) How does the insufficient school readiness of these learners influence your teaching in the classroom?
- x) What is the effect of insufficient school readiness on the learning and progress of these specific learners?
- xi) What are your main concerns regarding the issue of insufficient school readiness?
- xii) What possible solutions can you recommend to improve the level of school readiness of your Grade 1 learners at school entry?

**DATA: TRANSCRIBED AND ARRANGED ACCORDING
TO INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

INTERVIEW QUESTION 1

How do you experience your Grade 1 learners at the beginning of the year regarding their level of readiness for formal learning?

This year's Grade 1's is the weakest group that we have ever had. They are becoming weaker every year.

And then these little children who do not understand what their teacher is saying, they do not understand . . . and then they are far too young . . . not at all ready to be here

Another thing is listening skills, these little ones are not able to listen, discipline, it is a big problem

They cannot sit on a chair yet, they cannot sit still for one second . . . and the basic things that a young child of six already should know, they do not know. For example, sit on your chair, listen to the teacher, stop fiddling, these things, every child has a problem if you look at it this way. Cannot stand in a line, cannot walk in a line, cannot wait his turn, these are things, fine they have to learn it, but they should have had some experience in it before they come to us.

Basic instructions, for example, take out your book, it takes forever . . . concentration, it gets worse every year. It is very bad.

. . . they are very disruptive, I find because sometimes they don't understand the work and then they become naughty, bothering the other children . . . even simple instructions, they don't follow them.

Those children have to get up at four o'clock in the morning then they are dead tired, the little ones are sleeping in the class. They are fast asleep. Fast asleep. The one moment they are still watching and the next moment he is just gone. I have taken videos of it, where they are sleeping like this and then I think, you are going to fall from the chair now. It's funny, but it's bad.

We found that on a Monday morning, those children sit here and they are dead tired. Then you would ask: Who watched Spiderman last night? Me Mam! Then I know that programme, it carries on until ten or ten thirty at night.

We teach them, we tell the parents, give them healthy food, if you really have to give it (castor oil), rather give it on a Friday than on a Monday. I complain a lot about that. It is a big problem for me, the food is really a big problem, Okay, they often bring a big plate cooked food, but others come with packets of chips, and it's cookies, (Kentucky fried chicken), or they have money, tuck-shop money.

It is as if the visual perceptual problems are not as serious as the auditory perceptual problems. Auditory has suddenly exploded it is very, very weak.

We mentioned auditory and visual perceptual problems, but even the fine motor skills are very weak, those perceptual skills.

Yes, but they love climbing and playing and they still run around everywhere, but there is a problem with weight, a six year old that weighs 45 kg. You can think that little one cannot move the way he should, they cannot sit properly at the tables. You know, spatial, these children cannot work in smaller spaces at all.

And to take care of their belongings, nothing, you know they, they break everything, they cannot look after their stuff, it lies around. I had one child today, four times her pencil was picked up, then they come 'I can't find my pencil', they have this learned helplessness, 'I can't, I don't remember'.

Aids they want us to use, those charts and stuff, if you start, half of it is missing, 'I don't know', then you spend half an hour to look for it, because if he doesn't find it he starts crying. Emotionally they are not ready yet, they do not know how to handle themselves and how to look for something. They are used to the fact that it is done for them.

Look I've been teaching Grade 1's for decades, it is by far the weakest group that we have had, it is terrible, I just hope next year will not be worse, because I tell you I can't . . .

The parents think they will get a better education here, they come from very far, but it will not necessarily happen, because the child is not ready.

The basic areas that we find that they are lacking, they don't know how to listen and interpret basically your questions. It's not necessarily a language problem, it's more the listening, they don't want to hear and do, a lack of obedience as well. They are really disobedient at times. Perceptual wise I find that some of my children colouring in, they tend to colour in in any direction, instead of just one way, cutting out skills, very poor, pasting.

I cannot do group work, they cannot sit still by themselves and work independently.

Well it has improved, as I've said, because I mean our Grade R teachers are excellent teachers, so I'm not sure what it is like at the other schools, but I can say definitely from our Grade R's, I've seen an improvement and even from across the road, there is definitely an improvement from last year to this year.

INTERVIEW QUESTION 2

What do you regard as the main causes of insufficient school readiness?

A big problem is their language – it is not their mother tongue, it is not mother tongue instruction. We first have to get these little children on a level where you can continue with teaching. It is a big problem for me. And then these little children who do not understand what their teacher is saying, they do not understand the language . . .

I think may be because most of our kids actually come from our Grade R classes, the language this year, I'm not talking about previous years, but this year in particular, it has been well developed. We don't really have too many children with that language deprivation. So this year is not so much of a problem, where as previous years there were.

. . . and then they are far too young. We had one who just turned six today. Many of these little ones are intelligent, but not at all ready to be here.

Look, it is cheaper to send a child to school . . . we have started this year, we tried, with the parents who bring their children to school at this very young age, then the secretary brings them here to me. Then I explain to them what it is all about, because everyone always tell me 'they are very bright, just give them a chance', but in the middle of the year, they say 'wow'

Yes, I've got one child for example, she's a bright little girl, but if she had stayed behind a year later, she would have been top of the class. But now, because of enrolling too early, emotionally she can't handle the pressure, you know what I mean, so unfortunately she is an average child where she could have been a top child.

We are not allowed to say you are not allowed to come to school, because it's according to law, they are allowed to. But I know the grade R's do, they advise the parents as such. They say the kids will benefit if they are emotionally stable as well, not just academically. I also speak to the parents, that one year of extra input, and I say, you know this is my experience.

Besides the language that they don't understand, those who do understand English, understand it the way their parents speak English. So the type of English they hear is another thing. So the language is a big problem, because they do not understand.

Mom and Dad will listen immediately, where we say, wait, I am talking. They do not understand, it is my turn, and then it is your turn

. . . they experience discipline or the listening to instructions differently from us, because many times you would call in the parent and say that you are struggling with this little one in your class, and the parents will be amazed and will ask: what does the child do wrong?

It is also nowadays a common habit under parents, it is easy to tell the children to shhh. . . and sit in front of the television – watch your programme, Mommy is busy. And it's action, it's kicking, shooting and killing.

. . . children might for example grow up with Granny, because Mom works until seven or eight o'clock in the evening. Granny is illiterate, it's really, it is a big problem, and they do not know how, or what is right and acceptable. For them, it is ok if the child is running around and just carrying on. We found that on a Monday morning, those children sit here and they are dead tired. Then you would ask: Who watched Spiderman last night? Me Mam! Then I know that programme, it carries on until ten or ten thirty at night. Those children have to get up at four o'clock in the morning then they are dead tired, the little ones are sleeping in the class.

As far as work is concerned, again the parents and even the preschool teachers don't know how to teach the children, they still teach the children A,B, C and then they come here 'A for apple'. And then pronunciation itself, for example 'elephant', we get that, 'e', 'a', especially the vowels, yes, the vowels, they don't hear those differences. So there it is the pronunciation of the English, it is really a big problem. And that confuses the children a lot.

. . . and those who came from the other preschools are very weak . . . the mother stood here crying, telling me that the preschool has graduated the child, so for me a big problem is the preschools that are uninformed about what school readiness is, they just send all of them and say that they are ready, but they are not.

. . . they say we are too strict and this and that, but at home it is this 'let them be', 'you can play with your friends in the streets', 'just make sure that you sleep at home'. You see it is really a big difference, and I feel parents must also be informed about what will be expected from their children.

INTERVIEW QUESTION 3

How does the insufficient school readiness of these learners influence your teaching in the classroom?

They have basic things, look, I cannot teach a class if there is a hum, they have to be quiet otherwise they cannot hear what I am saying.

Some days it feels as if I am not teaching them anything, I am busy with behaviour all the time.

Basic instructions, for example, take out your book, it takes forever, they understand it, but it is as if the message only gets to here (points at ear). No further. And then, you are still busy talking to this side, then the other side . . .

Look, they are very disruptive, I find because sometimes they don't understand the work and then they become naughty, bothering the other children. They create a huge problem, then your time, the time you spend reprimanding them instead of teaching, so it's a big problem for us .And explaining over and over again for them. The other tell them listen the first time, even simple instructions, they don't follow them.

We as teachers, I always tell them, I am not a clown, I am not the entertainer, I am your teacher, look, listen, it's the only way you are going to learn. Now I don't know if that is all, look we try to make it interesting, it is not that we only stand there and talk, talk, talk, we make it as interesting as we can. But, it is as if you have to be Wow! before they will pay attention. And we cannot always.

And then the support from the parents, because the parents don't know how to help the children. Look, their homework takes me longer than my preparation for class, because I try to show them exactly and then it just is not done, or the parents do not understand it.

There are some parents who are very supportive and very involved in the children's lives, but you also have the parents who don't spend any time with them or do anything. Especially, we send our books home to be signed, so that the parents can actually have a look at the children's work, and often it comes back not signed. I also find that they don't always know how to help their children, simple things like the sounds. They teach them A,B,C, instead of a,b,c, they don't always know.

Now our classrooms are not suited for Grade 1's, because it is very small and I have so many children who have to sit alone, they cannot, they cannot work with someone else. Those who are sitting together are already a frustration for me, they really need space. So that is for them, that spatial thing, is a big problem.

Look, we have beautiful Grade 1 classes, but the Grade 2's are there now, with the numbers, they have 40 plus, we are very fortunate, we only have 30 each in our classes, you have 31? Now it's just 30. Thirty in a Grade 1 class, it is already a lot, with all the barriers there are, but at least it is not 40 plus. That is why we are in the smaller classrooms, but really, you know, if I think quickly, I have eleven children who must sit alone at a table, because they do not just disturb the children around them, they disturb themselves, they cannot share that small space with someone. You have to see it, you don't believe us when we say it.

You see, another thing that I think of now with the assessment of these little things, they have eyes like chameleons, they just do this. They copy so much, then you think, wow, this child is clever, until the day that you assess this child individually, then you see, but this child can do absolutely nothing. And then you have a bigger problem. So now, when we write tests, I let every row write on their own, for example first the one row on this side and then on the other side, because they are copying. They are dependent on each other. They don't understand the instructions at all.

Concentration. Oh, it is terrible. You know, it is like, I tell them sometimes it is like pop corn, they just pop like this, each one in another place, if you have one down, another one starts. It is, you know, it feels to me now already as if it is the end of November, you are drained, you are done, it takes everything out of you.

See, here are the books that have to go home, there is no time to mark it in the class. Tuesdays and Wednesdays you have to do extra murals, so there is no extra time for you to do something, that is besides the preparation that has to be done, every time with the change of the policy, You cannot take the file of the previous year and say 'there, my work is done', that does not happen in teaching. I think there must be renewal, but it would have been great just for one year, to use the previous year's hard work just like it is and say we do it this way. And things that have to be rewritten in another format, where you could have used your time and energy for teaching the children. Look, files and photocopies with this IQS, you know they keep us so busy with completing forms that are of no value, and that is where a lot of our teaching time is lost.

You get some parents who are dedicated, but you also get parents who do nothing. It is as if the parents also give up trying.

I can't work with a buzz in the class. You just cannot get them to be quiet . . . just look at us, we are tired and it is only Monday. I just feel that we expect too much of these children. We said from the beginning when all the changes started, we don't want to lower our standards, we try, but at the moment, we are not going to make it at this pace, we just expect too much

of them. It is not fair towards the children some of these children just give up, because it is just too much.

That is another thing, the diversity amongst the children. You have a group of clever ones and a lot of weak ones. And the strong learners are the ones with the behavioural problems, because they are bored, you don't have time to give them something extra, because you still have to explain it to them. I cannot help the weak ones, because I have to get through this pile of work. For example the mathematics, it is a problem, because they did not master one concept properly, then, it's addition, subtraction, doubling, halving, more and less, it's just too many concepts, they haven't master one then the next one is there. The foundation is not laid properly, that is why we have so many learning problems later on.

Well, the ones who are not ready is a big problem, because they keep the whole class behind and the ones who are top of the class, sit and they get bored because you have to focus your attention on the slow ones. There's a huge gap, well in my class, between the tops and bottoms, there is really, yes.

In my class I cannot do group work, they fight about everything, they cannot share, give one another a chance to . . . taking turns. I have always found that at this age it is difficult to work in groups, always. And the problem is, what I found, is when you are busy with one group, then the rest of them want your attention and they cannot sit still by themselves and work independently, not at this stage. So it is very difficult for us as Grade 1 teachers to sit with a group on the carpet, you know, and teach them while the other groups are at their tables.

INTERVIEW QUESTION 4

What is the effect of insufficient school readiness on the learning and progress on the specific learners?

The little ones soon feel 'I cannot do what my friends can do', not that you focus on it or make an example of the child, he can just see that 'I don't know what my teacher is saying now, and my friends can do it', so they know very well that they cannot cope. And then they disturb their friends. And many times I can see that the child is losing all interest, "I cannot do it, so why should I try?"

Definitely they know it, they have a poor self image and that is why they play up. We try our best, you know to help them, but it doesn't always work. Then what happens is normally they repeat the grade.

You know, yes, I have for example a child who is repeating this year, he was in the other class last year. You know, in the year in which he is repeating, he is actually ready for it, but he has already done the work, so he is bored, and those children become your trouble makers. They have this attitude, they have really, because they are actually now your big children, they are eight in comparison with some of my children who are five years old. You have this big difference in ages, and then they bully the younger ones. It is just a whole lot of problems, behavioural problems, their behavioural problems surface especially in the second year.

I just feel that we expect too much of these children. We said from the beginning when all the changes started, we don't want to lower our standards, we try, but at the moment, we are not going to make it at this pace, we just expect too much of them. It is not fair towards the children some of these children just give up, because it is just too much.

INTERVIEW QUESTION 5

What are your main concerns regarding the issue of insufficient school readiness?

You know, if you look for example at the expectations of the policy, there are a lot of things that have to be assessed. Now in the first place our children are not ready for it. In the past we have done English on the first additional level, now we do it on home language level and we also do Afrikaans extra. (It is too much, they expect too much of these children.) The assessment, you know, I feel you just started the quarter then you assess, because that is what is expected of you. Now, but you cannot, because you are busy here with a child, then the rest breaks down the class. You cannot say to them, this is now your work, I expect this from you, because they cannot, you spoon feed them literally one sum at a time. That is really a big problem for us. So the assessment, the policy is a big problem, it is not on our children's (level), it is very, very difficult for them. It does not make provision for that, for making it accessible for them, for us to uplift them, they must just fall in and understand. Because you have to do Life Skills and all those things and then expect us to do group work, (oh, that does not work), there is no way, I do not do group work in mathematics, in the first place, space is a problem, secondly if you start with one group, the others break down, there is no discipline, even if you keep them in for break or whatever, they just not ready for it. The other Grades start with it, but if they come and confront me with it, I will just say 'come and show me how'.

You cannot, you cannot expect that, the expectations are too high for these little ones who are not ready for school yet. It is an ideal situation that is not practical. Not here with us.

See, here are the books that have to go home, there is no time to mark it in the class. Tuesdays and Wednesdays you have to do extra murals, so there is no extra time for you to do something, that is besides the preparation that has to be done, every time with the change of the policy, You cannot take the file of the previous year and say 'there, my work is done', that does not happen in teaching. I think there must be renewal, but it would have been great just for one year, to use the previous year's hard work just like it is and say we do it this way. And things that have to be rewritten in another format, where you could have used your time and energy for teaching the children. Look, files and photocopies with this IQS, you know they keep us so busy with completing forms that are of no value, and that is where a lot of our teaching time is lost.

We refer many children for professional support, to the remedial teacher, the occupational therapist, the speech therapist. My big problem is the parents that tell you they don't have the money, they cannot send the child, then you sit with your finger in your ear. I don't know what else to do, because from the department's side you get very little support.

At the moment, you know which children have problems, you know, but when must you take them? I let the stand at my table or around my table, and then you explain to them, but that is not always enough. It does not happen overnight, as you know it is a long process to get that little one to catch up with the others.

The ANA tests are like a dark cloud above our heads, because if you don't do well, you are called in and they have a serious talk with you. Now we put a lot of pressure on these children. I feel we go much too fast with them, we have to slow down, but we cannot, we have to get through all this work before September. I get nightmares about it, these ANA tests and my children have to perform.

The pace, the requirements . . . it is as if they want to teach these children too soon too many things, they are not ready for it, physically they are not ready for it, now where in the past we spend the whole first quarter on addition, now we have to do addition, subtraction, doubling and halving. It's about the number concept and other things, the policy and the reality in the classroom and what the department gives us, those blue DOE books, nothing comes together. That book is beautiful, colourful, the most beautiful pictures, but it does not correlate with the policy at all. We don't know what they want us to do.

I don't think your foundations are strong then, usually you finish one concept before you do the next one. If you have so many, I mean you're just touching on it and then you carry on. The other thing is word problems in Grade 1, they can barely read, but they must do word problems.

And the policy tells you in some places two minutes for this, three minutes for that, one minute for that . . . not practical.

It's too much for them. It really is, I mean they should still be playing at this stage and to sit down and do formal work, they are really not ready yet. And formal assessment, so much each day, it's tiring for them.

As a rule all of them struggle. All the Grade 1's. Yes. I just feel the curriculum, they expect too much of the children, definitely, too much.

I don't think it is only about the children who were not ready, I think it is in general the requirements are too much . . . you know these children are only on the concrete level now, they are not on an abstract level yet. That is just the way it is. Now you have to do problem solving with them, they don't even understand more and less, we are still trying to teach them to sit and to get up. And they take a very long time to learn that because they can also not follow instructions.

The work load and the fact that we can't stand still at one concept and lay the foundation properly and then only carry on.

. . . because of our system, that they are basically pushed through, instead of keeping them back. Yes. They are told you can go through. And usually the big trouble is in Grade 3, and that to me is wrong, you should say stop, you got to have the basics before you go to Grade 4.

INTERVIEW QUESTION 6

What possible solutions can you recommend?

I think in the first place, it has to start with the preschools. Those programmes, they have to do thorough research, it should not be only the Afrikaans schools, doing everything, and the others just carrying on as before, they have to look at the rural preschools and make sure that they do their work.

I also think in the process, parents have to be informed on how to teach their children. They have to be involved from the start, especially at the preschools, get them together, give them lectures, tell them, start a community project.

I would say, put all the children that's on one level in one class, so that you could follow, or do the work on their level, the slow ones and then the top ones in one class so that you can do additional, extra work with them. Now they are keeping everybody behind, a mixture, yes

it's a mixture, because you can't discriminate or whatever. That's the only way, I don't know, for me.

. . . the children were grouped according to their ages . . . and then we also had that perceptual work at the beginning . . . That's what we did as well, but then that all stopped, because we were not allowed to do that anymore. And I thought that that was such a pity, because I mean the amount of progress that you could see in those children, it was amazing. And I mean even those children who were the slower group, eventually caught up, because you could work at their pace.

Because the thing is as well, you know, your children, you could group them according to their language ability, not necessarily their maths, because I saw their maths can be tops, but if you do it according to their language . . .

At this stage I think our Grade R's have done a pretty good job of doing what they were supposed to have done, especially this year. So that Grade R year, that preschool year is extremely important. Yes, definitely.

The one thing that I do find is missing in our curriculum, is the playtime, you know children should be allowed to play and do a lot more practical activities that are fun. The curriculum at the moment is basically mainly at the desks, a fast pace all the time, instead of just slowing down and enjoying it a bit.

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RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE

CLEARANCE NUMBER :

EC 12/11/02

DEGREE AND PROJECT

MEd

The impact of insufficient school readiness on learning in Grade 1: teachers' experiences and concerns

INVESTIGATOR(S)

Marietjie Bruwer

DEPARTMENT

Early Childhood Education

DATE CONSIDERED

03 February 2014

DECISION OF THE COMMITTEE

APPROVED

Please note:

For Masters applications, ethical clearance is valid for 2 years

For PhD applications, ethical clearance is valid for 3 years.

**CHAIRPERSON OF ETHICS
COMMITTEE**

Prof Liesel Ebersöhn

DATE

03 February 2014

CC

Jeannie Beukes
Liesel Ebersöhn
Dr MG Steyn
Prof CG Hartell

This ethical clearance certificate is issued subject to the following condition:

1. It remains the students' responsibility to ensure that all the necessary forms for informed consent are kept for future queries.

Please quote the clearance number in all enquiries.