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SOUTH AFRICA**

**THE RECEPTION YEAR:
AN EXPLORATORY
STUDY**

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I. Introduction

1.1 Purpose

Education is one of the cornerstones of economic development. The role of education in most African countries is increasing in importance, with success in school becoming an important prerequisite for formal sector employment. Policymakers, educators, and parents are concerned about assuring that children entering school are capable of handling the environment that characterizes formal schooling. However, how does one know when children are ready to learn? How does one know when schools are ready for children?

The concept of readiness has been a source of discussion for decades (Kagan, 1990). A key philosophical debate centers on whether children's learning is influenced more by the biological stages involved in growth or by the learning experiences provided through their environments and the key actors (parents, peers, teachers). The South African early childhood policymakers take the position that all children are born with a capability for learning and that inherent growth processes and experience both contribute to children's learning (Interim Policy for Early Childhood Development, 1996). Educators recognize that the quantity and rate of learning during early childhood set the stage for life-long learning. However, what children learn, how they learn, and how much they learn depend on many factors. Chief among them are the child's cognitive development and their physical and socio-emotional well-being often influenced by poverty, English-language proficiency, nutrition and access to healthcare. In South Africa, these factors are coupled with homelessness, violence and inadequate funding for pre-primary education (Eckstein, 1994).

Another host of factors are school-related and include teacher philosophies and expectations as well as the classroom environment itself. This means that researchers examining the concept of "readiness" need to focus as much on how families are supported in preparing their children for school learning as on the appropriate practices used in schools for meeting the needs of children at distinct developmental levels and of varying backgrounds. This exploratory study examines ten pre-primary and reception year classrooms for the following purposes:

1. To explore teacher and trainers' perceptions of the proposed strategies incorporated in the Interim policy for the Reception Year;
2. To identify indicators for use in the development of instruments for examining classroom processes and appropriate practices for the Reception Year Class; and
3. To develop appropriate instruments incorporating the indicators and using them to explore classroom activities and processes in classrooms for 5- and 6-year olds.

The research questions to be examined through this study are as follows:

- a) What are teachers' and educare teacher trainers' perceptions of what should be happening in classrooms with 5- and 6-year olds?
- b) What classroom activities and processes occur in classrooms with 5- and 6-year olds?
- c) What classroom practices and processes support the Interim Policy guidelines for the Reception Year?

1.2. Background

After years of lobbying by early childhood groups, the Government of National Unity (GNU) has come to view the early childhood development (ECD) as the starting point for a human resource development strategy. The acknowledged importance of ECD as a fundamental pillar of the foundations for later or lifelong learning is an intrinsic component of the White Paper Policy Framework for Education and Training (1995).

The White Paper defines ECD as "an umbrella term that applies to the processes by which children from birth to nine years grow and thrive, physically, mentally, emotionally, morally and socially" (p.33). ECD programmes in South Africa include a variety of strategies and a wide range of services directed at helping families and communities to meet the needs of children between the age's birth to nine. This development phase is particularly crucial in the context of the reconstruction and development as impoverished families are not able to meet the developmental needs of their children without assistance. Many young children are at risk because their health, nurture and education cannot be provided for adequately from resources available within the community.

To begin the process of reversing the historic neglect of ECD the GNU has put in place the Interim Policy for ECD within which the GNU commits itself to include a preschool year, or the reception year, as part of the 10 years of compulsory schooling.

With more and more children participating in early childhood programs before they enter school, there is an increasing focus on the transition that occurs when children move from preschool to primary school in grade 1. Transition efforts help ease the entry into school by preparing children for the differences they will encounter in future formal schooling contexts. IEQ studies of educare in South Africa (Dlamini, 1995) pointed out that early childhood education environments emphasized developmentally appropriate practices to encourage learning for preschool children. Focus group research (Chávez, Dlamini, Moodley, 1996) found that grade 1 school programs in South Africa were perceived to have a different philosophy, teaching style, and structure than those characteristic of educare programs. Such differences are not characteristic solely of the South African context. Educators in India, Japan, the U.S. and other parts of the world have noted the change in emphasis from a child-oriented focus on play to what was formerly first grade material in transition or readiness classrooms (Graue, 1992; Pattnaik, 1996; Mantzicopoulos and Fulk, 1995; Bredekamp and Shepard, 1989).

According to international literature transition or “readiness” approaches are not all alike. In fact, Mantzicopoulos and Fulk (1995) documented how “readiness classrooms” differed in teaching philosophies, strategies and environments. The varying approaches have been shown to have differential effects on children’s learning and achievement (Gordon, 1983; Stipek, Daniels, Galluzzo and Milburn, 1992); for example, full-time programs have more positive effects than half-day or alternate day programs (Cryan, Sheehan, Wiechel and Bandy-Hedden, 1992). Other studies show how experiences provided by parents influence a child’s learning (Hess, Azuma, Kashiwagi, Holloway and Wenegrat, 1987); still other research documents how teacher expectations or the experiences they provide influence children’s learning (Spitzer, Cupp, and Park, 1995; Graue, 1992; Hains, Fowler, Schwartz, Kottwitz and Rosenkoetter, 1989; Smith and Shepard, 1988; Shepard and Smith, 1986; Hadley, Wilcox and Rice, 1994). Some studies point to the importance of early childhood education in making a significant difference in learning. For example, two studies confirm the particular home, school, and extracurricular experiences that impact an individual’s reading achievement over the course of development. The first study, the Kindergarten Reading Follow-up (KRF) Study, examined the long-term effects on children of being taught to read in kindergarten (Hanson and Siegel, 1988; 1991). The second study, the Reading Development Follow-up (RDF) Study, analyzed the same data to identify the specific kinds of experience, from preschool through high school, that foster high levels of reading achievement in high school seniors (Siegel, 1987). The results imply that students who are provided with more of these specific kinds of experiences across their development will have higher reading achievement levels as young adults than those who have less.

Differences in teaching approaches, educational experiences, and readiness environments, then, all contribute to children’s learning. Given the differences in approaches, though, it is important to acknowledge Willer and Bredekamp’s (1990) cautionary note that any transition or “readiness” policy must reflect an equal access to learning opportunities for all children, the need for comprehensive services to aid each child to learn, and the concept that schools must be ready to help every child.

Lombardi (1992) suggests that effective transition efforts for young children are based on identifying certain key elements that characterize all good early childhood programs rather than on bridging the gap among different types of programs. Among the key elements suggested are ensuring that teaching practices are pegged to developmental levels; incorporation of parents into the school; and the provision of supportive services to both the child and family.

This exploratory study examined practices used by pre-primary teachers with 5- and 6-year old children in South African schools to identify the presence of key elements of continuity in the classroom. Due to the short amount of time for the study, the focus was on classroom practices though the researchers acknowledge the importance of examining the home environment in any study of transitions from preschool to level 1 grades.

1.3 Methodology

1.3.1 Design

The study methodology consisted of a two-pronged approach to the gathering of information. The first phase consisted of focus groups with teachers and teacher trainers. This phase permitted researchers to identify themes and data gathering strategies for Phase II. Additionally, it allowed researchers to identify appropriate language for use in any instruments for observation or interviews during Phase II. Readers are referred to Chavez, Dlamini, and Moodley (1996) for a discussion of focus group results. Briefly, the general approach was as follows:

Phase I

Focus Groups: Two focus groups with teachers in educare and pre-primary grade levels; one focus group with educare teacher trainers. The focus groups helped in identifying appropriate classroom processes and appropriate practices to examine.

Phase II

Field Study: Site visits to ten classrooms for 5- and 6-year olds were undertaken. Instruments were developed to explore the viability of using the instruments for long-term research studies of the reception year.

Sample

During Phase II, a convenience sample of 10 reception year classrooms were selected for the study. Classrooms were selected to ensure comparability across two different locations. The sample was limited to transition year classrooms that provided full-time programs. Additionally, the sample included five programs offered through the government and five programs offered through non-governmental organizations. Also, five of the programs were located in Capetown and another five in Gauteng, South Africa. Finally, five of the programs were in peri-urban areas whereas another five were located in urban sectors.

A total of 10 classrooms were observed. Also, teachers in these classrooms were interviewed for the study. Observations were carried out to examine the use of specific teaching practices across classroom contexts and to describe the classroom environments that comprised the reception year classrooms. Two ten-minute observations were carried out in each classroom.

1.3.2 Description of Instruments

Studies of early childhood learning environments point to the need to include qualitative approaches in examining such learning contexts (Seppanen, Goding, Metzger, Bronson and Cichon, 1993; Love, Logue, Trudeau, and Thayer, 1992). The approach used in this exploratory study was to use multiple instruments to obtain as complete a picture of the classroom processes operating in the transition classrooms. Among the instruments used in the study were the following:

Reception Year Classroom Snapshot/Checklist was developed to permit recording the activities and groups found in the classroom at a given point during the day. It also permitted recording of the classroom arrangement and aspects of the classroom environment. A snapshot was carried out at the start of the observation day. This instrument was used to count the presence or absence of items in the environment important to ECD practices in stimulating learners and encouraging learning.

Reception Year Learner Observation Form allowed observers to record the behavior of a subsample of children in a specified classroom over five contexts. The observer asked the teacher to identify two children; one child identified by the teacher as "Not Ready" for Grade 1; the other described by teachers as "Ready" for Grade 1. The observer followed the children in the classroom or outdoor play and observed for two 5-minute periods in each context. The observer recorded the target child's actions, the number of other learners involved with the target learner and behaviors exhibited during the observation period. The form permitted recording the types of activities and practices used by the learner in the five contexts: whole class, small group, transition/morning snack, individual seat work and free play.

Reception Year Classroom Observation Form (Teacher Observation Form) permitted data collection on teaching processes and strategies used by the teacher twice over five-minute spans in each of five contexts. The observer recorded selected behaviors of teachers including number and type of interactions with learners, context, number of learners involved, and language strategies involved.

A Teacher Interview Schedule was developed, pretested and finalized for use in identifying teacher perceptions of appropriate practices for the transition year and the nature of collaboration among preschool, pre-primary and primary level staff. The interview covered the following topics: teacher background and experiences, training, teaching approach, parental involvement, and teacher's perceptions of the policy, appropriate classroom practices, and learner skills for the Reception Year and promotion to Grade 1.

1.3.3 Data Analysis

The analysis of the data was based on descriptive statistics for the teacher interview data and qualitative descriptions of the classroom observation. The statistics summarized the nature of perceptions, processes, and events found in the reception year classrooms. The summary statistics served to focus on the presence or absence of phenomena or the nature of phenomena in the classrooms. The analysis carried out provided frequency counts to responses for each of the major variables where data were collected. For questions with multiple responses, aggregations of data may total more or less than the respective sums. This variation in total responses is due to two principal factors: a) the question may apply to only a subgroup, thus, may not include all the sample; and b) the analysis takes into account missing data and /or response refusals in some of the variables.

With open-ended questions, where possible, qualitative data analysis procedures sought to illuminate meaning and to interpret events. Data from open-ended questions underwent analysis through two principal procedures:

- a) Transformation into quantitative data through coding (e.g., factors counted for frequency);
- b) Examination of categories to discern what these mean.

Data analysis consisted of three linked subcomponents—data reduction; data display; and conclusion drawing/verification. These processes were carried out before, during and after data collection in the form of study design (before), interim/early analysis (during) and final production of conclusions (after). Through the analysis, the researchers were able to arrive at coherent examples, themes and patterns in the data by area of inquiry.

Findings permit description of Reception Year classrooms, link perceptions and actual practices, permit operationalizing strategies outlined in the Interim Policy for ECD document from a practitioners' perspective and allow identifying implications for teacher training.

Additionally, findings from this exploratory study contribute to a growing body of knowledge on the interaction of multiple environments in the learning process. Only through understanding these environments and creating a supportive atmosphere can we enhance children's learning outcomes.

II. Findings

This section of the report consists of two parts. One part presents information from the interviews that were held with teachers; a second part provides data from the classroom observations. Readers are cautioned against generalizing the information gleaned from the teacher interviews and the classroom observations to all Reception Year classrooms in South Africa, as the small sample size and the purposive sampling strategy utilized to pick the sites indicate that the specific classrooms selected for this study may not be representative of all such classrooms in country. However, the information contained in this section of the report presents a picture of the practices within the ten classes observed as well as the perceptions of ten ECD practitioners.

2.1 Teacher Interviews

Altogether ten teachers were interviewed for this study. The teacher interview sought to ascertain the perceptions of teachers regarding the Reception Year programme for children aged 5 to 6 years. Also, the interview sought to identify teacher's perceptions of the strategies and activities that they undertake in the implementing the programme. This subsection of the report presents information on teacher background, perceived links with home, with schools and with the local communities, and teacher perceptions of the practices they utilise in the classroom.

2.2 Profile of the Teachers

Interviewers asked the teachers to provide some background information on themselves. Among the information collected were the teacher's age, experience teaching and training received.

Table 1 below provide a brief summary of the age ranges of the teachers who participated in this study.

2.2.1 Range in Ages of Teachers

Table 1:

Age Range	Percent
less than 25	0
26 - 30	40
31 - 35	20
36 - 40	10
over 40	30
TOTAL N=	100 % (10)

Ages of teachers who participated in the study ranged from 26 to more than 40 years of age. Forty percent of the teachers in the sample were aged between 26 and 30, while 30% were over forty years of age. Almost three out of four teachers were between 26 and 40 years old.

2.2.2 Gender

All the participants in the study were female. The dominance of females in the early childhood development field is the norm both within South Africa and internationally. Possible reasons for this situation are that females are viewed as the primary care givers of children and therefore this would be a suitable job for them; and the salary for an educare worker is very low and would not necessarily be attractive to males.

2.2.3 Experience as a pre-school teacher

Teachers were asked to describe to rely what the preschool teaching experience meant for them personally. The majority of the teachers stated that their experience thus far had been a very enjoyable and rewarding one. One teacher stated,

the highlight of my life was when I was invited to my ex-preschool child's university graduation.

Another teacher added,

I was responsible for providing a start to a better life for the children I worked with, and this gives me the greatest satisfaction.

Among other comments made by the respondents regarding their experiences as pre-school teachers were as follows:

*Teaching children in the 5 - 6 year age group has meant a great deal of work but has been a great learning experience;
The experience has been challenging and has unearthed the hidden potential in me.
It has resulted in me being exposed to a range of cultures, language groups and children from different socio-economic background.
It has exposed me to both the beauty in children as well as the suffering they endure at times.*

Finally, one noted, “*apart from being developed through my work with the children I have used my talents to develop them*”.

2.2.4 Number of years of teaching experience

Teachers were asked to state the number of years of experience in teaching 5 and 6 year old children. The following table presents the findings.

Table 2: Teaching Experience

<i>Number of Years</i>	<i>Percent</i>
1 - 6	10
7 - 12	70
more than 12 years	20
TOTALS (N=)	100 % (10)

The number of years of experience with this particular age group varied for the teachers in the study. Teachers' experience in teaching five and six year old children ranged from two to 33 years. Most teachers reported that they had over five years of experience working with the age group. Except for one teacher whose teaching experience was two years, the rest of the teachers reported their experience was seven years or more. Seventy percent (70%) of the teachers had between seven and 12 years; while two had more than 12 years of experience. This information suggests that participants were experienced teachers.

2.2.5 Training Received

All the participants interviewed for this study were teachers. As part of the interview, they were asked about their training background. Respondents were asked whether they had received training in the area of early childhood education. Those who had received training were also asked to identify the source of the training; that is, they were asked whether they had received formal training from a college of education or if they had received non-formal training from a non-governmental educare organization. The following table presents the findings.

Table 3: Training Received

<i>Training Received</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Formal	50
Non-formal	40
Formal & Non-formal	10
TOTAL (N=)	100 % (10)

As can be seen in Table 3, half (50%) of the research participants received formal training from a college of education or a University. These qualifications were accredited at a Diploma or

Degree level. Forty percent (40%) of participants received non-formal training from non-governmental educare organizations and these courses were not accredited. The certificates received were Level I and II (levels utilized by South African Training Institute in Childhood Education in their accreditation of NGO courses).

2.3 Institutional Background

The interviews were also used as a strategy to collect information on the schools and communities where the Reception Year classrooms were located. Teachers were asked about their schools including the status of their school, registration, enrollment and community involvement efforts. The discussion that follows centers on these factors.

2.3.1 Location and type of school

The majority of the participants (70%) taught in urban schools and 60% of the schools were private pre-schools. This situation is the norm within the South African context. The latter, i.e. a predominance of private schools, is the result of the apartheid policies where black (African, Indian and Colored) communities had to take the responsibility for providing educare services for their young ones. This was not the same practice for the white communities for which the government either provided these services or the services were extensively subsidized.

2.3.2 Registration of preschools and educare centres

The majority of preschool teachers (70%) stated that their schools were registered. Of those registered, six of the seven were registered with the Provincial Department of Education, and one was registered with a Local Government.

2.3.3 Number of children enrolled

Teachers were also asked to provide the number of children enrolled in their Reception Year classroom. The following table presents the number of children who were enrolled in each of the classrooms.

Table 4: Reception Year Study Classroom Enrollment

Class enrollmentPercent

Less than 20	20
21-30	30
31 - 40	50
TOTALS (N=)	100 % (10)

As evident in the above table, fifty percent (50%) of the teachers stated that their class sizes ranged from 31 to 40. There were two (20%) respondents that stated they had less than 20 children in their classes. Both these classes were situated in a peri-urban area in a squatter community in an informal settlement.

Almost all the teachers stated that the children attending the Reception Year classroom had previous exposure to day-care centres, creches or nursery schools. Teachers perceived that the transition into the children's respective pre-schools had been very easy due to their previous experience in day care.

2.4 Links with the formal school, the home and the community

The interview also asked teachers about linkages with educare centres and with the formal schools, the homes of the children and the communities from which children come. The Interim Policy notes the importance of the links in aiding the learner with the transition to the formal school.

2.4.1 Links with the formal school

Sixty percent (60%) of the respondents stated that they did not have any links with the formal schools in which their children attend after preschool years. Those respondents (40%) that do have links with the formal schools are in situations where the pre-school is part of the formal junior primary school, or it is a private school which starts at pre-school and continues up to the intermediate phase (Standard 2 - Standard 5).

Preschool teachers who indicated that they had established links with formal schools reported that their relationship with the schools afforded them the opportunities to informally discuss the curriculum, the different activities they conducted with the preschool children, and even to share resources with the Grade I teachers. Where there were children with learning difficulties,

preschool teachers had the opportunities to alert primary teachers of those children. Some preschool teachers were even invited by formal schools to attend and participate in sports or cultural days of the respective schools and to sit on the respective schools governing bodies.

2.4.2 *Links with the child's home*

Eighty percent (80%) of the respondents stated that their preschools had links with their children's homes. Additionally, six of the eight teachers reported that the schools had adopted a policy which encouraged establishing links with the children's homes.

Teachers indicated that they interface most often with parents, and to a lesser extent, with grandparents and other relatives. In many (40%) of the cases, teachers reported that they met on a quarterly basis with a learner's care-giver (parent, grand-parent or other relative). Two (20%) respondents stated that they met the parents or guardian biannually, and two (20%) reported that they meet learner's caregivers on a monthly basis.

2.4.3 *Parental involvement with the Pre-school Child*

Teachers were asked about the involvement of parents in the care and education of their children. Results are provided in Table 6. Each row represents the proportion of teacher citing that strategy as one their parents use.

Table 5 : Level and Nature of Parental Involvement

Perceived Parental Involvement	Proportion Yes
Attends meetings	50% (5)
Participates on the school board	40% (4)
Monitors child's progress	20% (2)
Participates in school events	60% (6)
Provides materials	20% (2)
Participates in parent committees	60% (6)

As seen in the table, teachers reported various ways in which parents of children were involved in the care and development of their children at school. Three main areas were reported in which parents were involved were in the Reception Year classroom. Teachers noted that parents were involved in school events (60%) (concerts, sports, cultural days, fund-raising). However, they also qualified the nature of parent participation stating that the involvement of parents was determined by whether their children were participating in the respective events, i.e., if their children were participating then the parents were more likely to come and watch their child participate in a school event. In each instance, only two teachers mentioned use of the strategy of the involvement of parents specifically in relation to the progress of a child (20%) and in the education and cognitive development of the child (20%).

Parents were involved in the running of the pre-schools mainly in two ways. Six out of ten (60%) teachers mentioned that parents participated in the governance of the school. Parents contributed in the management and administration of the school by planning and facilitating fundraising activities; in some cases, teachers reported that parents handled school finances. The second way in which parents contributed to the success of the school was by providing waste materials which teachers used to create learning aids. However, in the other 40% cases, teachers complained about the lack of involvement of parents in the running of the school.

2.4.4 *Strategies used to encourage parental involvement*

Teachers were asked to identify the strategies they had in place to encourage parental involvement with the pre-school child. The following table presents teachers' responses. Again, each row represents an independent query and response.

Table 6: Strategies to Encourage Parental Involvement

Strategies	Percent
Fundraising	70
Have a parent committee	50
Circulate newsletter, letters	40
Social events	40
Workshop with parents	30
Open-days	20
Morning and departure greeting	20
Graduation of children	20
Home visits	20

Teachers reported a variety of strategies they used to encourage the active involvement of parents in the education of their children. The majority of teachers (70%) stated that they involved parents in the fundraising activities. This was followed by getting them to participate on parents' committee (50%). Sending newsletters and letters to parents was reported as used by 40 percent of the teachers. Other strategies used to encourage parental participation were conducting workshops with parents; having open days in which parents visit school to learn more about the many activities in which their children are engaged; talking to parents as they bring and fetch their children in the mornings and afternoons; inviting parents to the graduation of their children at the end of the year; and visiting homes to learn more about the background of children. Different strategies seemed to work for different schools. However, one teacher stated that no strategy seemed to lead to meaningful participation of parents in the education of pre-school children in their school.

2.4.5 Community Involvement

Teachers were asked to describe the involvement of the community with the pre-school. The following table presents the findings. Each row provides data for an independent response.

Table 7: Community Involvement in the School

Community involvement	Percent
No community involvement	60
Participates in the government body	30
Participates in fundraising events	20
Establishes links with the community-based organizations	20
Provides resources	10
Establishes links with formal schools	10
Publicity	10

Sixty percent of the respondents (60%) stated that the local community was not involved with the pre-school at all. In those schools where teachers reported community participation (40% of the cases), the community's reported involvement varied from membership on the school governing body; participating in fundraising events; establishing links with community-based organizations; providing resources; establishing links with formal schools; or conducting publicity campaigns to promote the school.

2.5 Interim Policy

Of interest was whether there was general awareness of the Interim Policy on EDC. As part of the interview, teachers were asked whether they were aware that there was an Interim Policy on early childhood development. Sixty percent (60%) of the teachers stated that they are aware of the interim policy. Interestingly, all of these respondents were employees in urban schools. Those respondents that reported they were uninformed about the policy were working in peri-urban areas.

The respondents who reported being informed about the interim policy noted that they had acquired the information through the South African Congress for ECD, the school coordinators or the South African Democratic Teachers Union.

2.5.1 Understanding the concept of a Reception Year

Teachers were asked what they understood by the reception year class. Four of them provided descriptions of the Reception Year. One noted that the Reception year was “*the first year of formal schooling*”; another described it as “*a preparatory class in the primary school*”; a third teacher stated that it was “*a year before a child attends school*”; finally, one said it was “*a bridging year between the nursery school and the formal school*”. All these four teachers had heard of the Interim Policy for ECD. There was one teacher who had heard of the policy but had been ill-informed about its implementation and therefore could not even describe the reception year class; she described it as “*[a class] taught by the primary school teachers in educare centres with the educare teacher being the teacher’s assistant*”.

2.5.2 Strategies in place to determine whether a child is ready for Grade I

Teachers were asked what strategies they used to determine if a child is ready for Grade 1. The following table presents teachers’ responses.

Table 8: Reported Strategies to Assess School Readiness

<i>Assessment Strategies</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Formal checklist assessment	60
Teacher-parent decision	10
Recording of a child’s progress	10
Age	10
Teacher observation	10
TOTAL	100% (10)

Sixty percent (60%) of the teachers stated that they used, among other strategies, a formal checklist to assess the extent to which a child was ready for Grade I. Based on this assessment the child was recommended for Grade I. Other assessment strategies such as regular recording of child’s progress, and teacher-parent decision were utilized to a lesser extent. It seemed that many teachers were, in general, very much aware of those children who were ready for school through interacting with them and observing them. Only one teacher mentioned age as a criterion for determining whether a child was ready for school or not; the others did not seem to be guided mainly by a child’s age.

2.6 *Classroom Practices*

Teachers were given a list of statements which might be used to characterize particular Reception Year practices in varying degrees. They were asked to rate the statements in a rating scale of 5; where '1= never happens', '2= rare', '3= sometimes', '4= often', and '5= always happens'. Table 9 presents the findings based on teacher ratings.

As evident in Table 9, the extent to which the various classroom practices occur differs by teacher. However, the many of the practices were reported as utilised by teachers in their classrooms . The most frequently reported classroom practices that are always used included dividing the classroom into different learning centres or interest areas (90%) and including play as an important part of everyday activities (90%). These practices are congruent with the classes and activities observed. Other classroom practices reported by respondents to occur frequently were:

- Dividing the curriculum into separate areas of learning with time allotted for each are of learning (80%). There was evidence of this practice in the classes observed, where the programme for the day was divided into different activities and different areas of learning, with times allocated for each session;
- block and construction toys are used for pre-math learning (80%). Block corners were observed in all the classrooms, however, in majority of the classes observed it was not used for pre-math learning. A plausible explanation is that the pre-math activities did not require the use of blocks;
- time for both outdoor and indoor play is allowed everyday (80%). In all the classes observed this was evident. A similar trend was observed where teachers provided opportunities for children to work together in small groups (70%) and to engage in structured free-play everyday (70%).
- Children selecting their own learning activities was perceived as a practice that occurs often or always in the classroom (70%);
- books and stories are the focus of pre-reading instruction is perceived by all the respondents as classroom practice often or always occurring;

Table 9: Classroom Practices and Reported Use

Classroom Practices	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always	TOTAL
The focus of pre-reading is a reader with workbook and worksheets.	40 %	10	20	30	0	100% (10)
Teachers provide opportunities for children to work together in small-group work.	0 %	10	0	20	70	100% (10)
Children are quiet during indoor activities.	10 %	20	70	0	0	100% (10)
The curriculum is divided into separate areas of learning with time allotted for each.	0 %	10	0	10	80	100% (10)
A number of different learning centers or interest areas are located in the classroom.	0 %	10	0	0	90	100% (10)
Classes are conducted primarily with children in whole-group arrangements.	0 %	10	20	50	20	100% (10)
Grades are used as important motivators.	80 %	10	0	0	10	100% (10)
The children's learning activities are primarily determined by the teacher.	0 %	0	30	10	60	100% (10)
Time is set aside for children to engage in structured free play everyday.	0 %	0	20	10	70	100% (10)
Children are observed regularly in each area of development for determining progress.	0 %	10	10	20	60	100% (10)
Daily worksheets are used to give children practice with the pre-writing skills they are learning.	0 %	10	30	30	30	100% (10)
Daily worksheets are used to give children practice with the pre-math skills they are learning.	0 %	20	40	30	10	100% (10)
Children have opportunities to dictate and/or write about their experiences several times a week.	0 %	10	0	30	60	100% (10)
All children are expected to achieve the same academic skills by the end of the Reception Year.	20 %	40	20	10	10	100 % (10)
Blocks and other construction toys are used for pre-math learning.	0 %	10	10%	0	80	100 % (10)
All children will know how to read by the end of the Reception Year.	40 %	20	10%	0	30	100 % (10)
Children select their own learning activities.	10 %	20	0	10	60	100 % (10)
Time for both outdoor and indoor play is allowed everyday (weather permitting).	0 %	0	0	20	80	100% (10)
Books/Stories are the focus of pre-reading instruction.	0 %	0	0	40	60	100 % (10)
Play is an important part of everyday activities.	0 %	0	0	10	90	100 % (10)

The classroom practice perceived by the respondents as occurring often or always is the regular observation of the children in each area of development for determining progress. This practice is portrayed in the classes observed as observing the children to assess whether they are following the instructions and providing them with positive guidance.

Several practices, however, were noted as rarely or never used. The classroom practice that teachers reported as never occurring is the use of grades as motivators (80%). Other practices that they reported never or rarely occurring were with regard to teacher expectations. The majority (60%) of teachers indicated that they do not expect all children will have the same academic skills by the end of the reception year. Another expectation that never or rarely occurs is the expectation that all the children will know how to read by the end of the Reception year (60%). Half of the teachers, though did report that they sometimes or often utilize a reader with workbook and worksheets for pre-reading. Additionally, 90 percent indicated that they sometimes, often or always use worksheets to permit children practice with pre-writing skills.

2.7 Skills

Teachers were presented with a list of skills relevant to children in this developmental level. They were asked to tick either a YES or NO next to each of the listed items to indicate those skills that they perceived were to be mastered by children by the end of the Reception Year. Table 10 provides the proportion of the ten (10) teachers responding yes to the query.

Table 10: Skills to be Mastered

Skills to be mastered at Reception Year	Yes
Demonstrates respect	100 %
Must know how to count	90 %
Sharing toys, materials	100 %
Tolerance	100 %
Cooperation	100 %
Independence	100 %
Express emotions appropriately	100 %
Follows instructions	100 %
Identifies seriation	90 %
Sorts by size, shape and color	100 %
Communicates needs	100 %
Shares experiences verbally	100 %
Must know how to read	40 %
Articulates thoughts clearly	90 %
Links concepts appropriately	100 %
Converses socially	100 %

Able to sequence	100 %
Estimates and predicts	90 %
Rote counting	90 %
Associates numbers with quantities	80 %
Associate classroom event with home	90 %
Can ask questions	100 %
Can express themselves creatively	100 %
Can appreciate beauty	100 %
Expresses curiosity	100 %
Must know how to write	70 %
Analytical	90 %
Plans, designs and implements	60 %
Understands the value of money	60 %
Caring for others	100 %
Demonstrates social awareness	90 %
Must know how to spell	0 %
Skills to be mastered at Reception Year	Yes
Listening	100 %
Cuts in a straight line	100 %
Kicks, throws, catches a ball, jumps, skips, hops	100 %
Traces	80 %
Self-care	100 %

The above skills may be divided into four areas of growth and development of children: (i) physical, (ii) social (iii) language and (iv) cognitive skills. Teachers' responses are then discussed under the respective categories.

2.7.1 Physical skills

All teachers perceived that the physical skills such as kicking, throwing, catching a ball, jumping, skipping and hopping were all skills to be mastered at reception year. While 100% of the teachers said children were supposed to be able to cut in a straight line, not all of them (80%) thought that tracing was to be mastered at this stage.

2.7.2 Social skills

There was 100% consensus among teachers in relation to social skills that were perceived necessary for children who were going on to Grade 1. They all thought that children at the age of five/six were supposed to be able to relate and interact with other children by being able to listen, care, share, converse, cooperate with and tolerate others. They were expected to relate to their teachers by being able to communicate needs, show respect, listen and cooperate.

2.7.3 Language skills

All of the teachers perceived language skills as necessary for basic communication among children and between children and teachers crucial at this stage. They all said that children should be able to share experiences verbally; must be able to converse socially with others and should be able and free to ask questions. The large majority of teachers (90%) also thought that children at reception year should be able to articulate their thoughts clearly.

2.7.4 Cognitive skills

There was a core of cognitive skills which all teachers perceived crucial to master at this stage of children's development. They thought five and six year old children should be able to follow instructions; sort by size, shape and colour; link concepts appropriately; sequence; express themselves creatively; and should be able to express curiosity. Even though there was not 100% consensus, the large majority (90%) of teachers thought that cognitive skills such as rote counting; identifying seriation; estimating and predicting; associating classroom events with home, and being analytical were skills to be mastered. While 90% said rote counting was necessary, not all of them (80%) thought associating numbers with quantities was to be mastered. While 70% of the teachers said writing was a skill to be acquired, teachers qualified the statement by saying this was confined to copying letters of the alphabet and their names. Few teachers (40%) regarded reading as a skill to be mastered at reception year. Some teachers (60%) thought skills such as planning, designing and implementing were skills that children could display during their creative work. Not a single teacher thought knowing how to spell was necessary for reception year children.

III. Observation Findings

This section of the report presents findings based on the qualitative instruments used for the study. The findings are intended to give the reader an impression of how the classrooms are organized and what goes on during the various contexts that comprise the Reception Year classroom. Findings are discussed for A) the Classroom Resources and Environment; B) the Classroom Arrangement; and for practices related to C) Classroom Management, including Teacher Practices and Learner Practices.

3.1 Classroom Resources and Environment

This section provides background information about the nature of classrooms or learning sites that were observed. The purpose of this information is to help the reader understand better the nature of activities and processes that occurred inside those classrooms. This information is obtained from the resources and environment checklist and supplemented with observers' descriptions of the classroom environment.

3.1.1 Spacing and Layout

On average, there were 10 square feet of space available to each child in the observed Reception Year classrooms. Seven of the 10 classrooms had adequate space for the number of children present. Three of such classrooms had an area of approximately 16 x 13 square feet, and accommodated, on average, 30 children.

The arrangement of fixtures and furnishings allowed a variety of activities to occur in the classrooms. All classrooms had at least three demarcated learning areas or corners: art area, book area, and fantasy area. In seven out of 10 classrooms, the areas were labelled. There was adequate space for free movement of children from one learning area to another. The tables and chairs were arranged in clusters of two, four or six to permit small group activities. The arrangement created adequate space for whole group activities such as morning ring, music and story activities. In almost all classrooms, these whole group activity areas had carpets or rugs to allow children to sit and lie down. In other classrooms the tables and chairs could be stacked together to create more space for whole group activities. In most classrooms, the layout was appropriately done.

Of the three classrooms in which there was inadequate space, the layout was poor in one classroom. Lack of space seems to have been the cause for the poor layout.

3.1.2 Fittings and Furniture

Except for two centres which were located at an informal dwelling place, children's toilets were situated adjacent to the classrooms. This made it convenient for toilet routine as well as washing

of hands after working with paint or any other messy materials. In addition to this, five of these classrooms had washing basins or sinks inside the classrooms.

All classrooms had either wooden cupboards or some shelving. In some classrooms these shelves were fitted on the walls. In one classroom, a free-standing L-shaped book shelf could be folded and locked. These cupboards sometimes served as dividers for the learning areas. In eight out of 10 classrooms, there were pigeon-holes for individual children to keep their bags. Few classrooms had hooks to hang children's jackets and aprons or racks to hang cups and store plates.

All classrooms had child-sized chairs either made of wood and steel or plastic for every child. Except for one classroom, all had tables which children shared. Tables were either made of plastic or of wood and covered with a plastic top to make them easy to clean.

In all classrooms the walls were adorned with many colourful pictures, posters and charts. Eight out of 10 classrooms had daily programmes posted up on the wall. Six classrooms had displays of children's work up on the walls.

3.1.3 Equipment

In all classrooms there were some educational materials including books, blocks, art materials, and puzzles. There were toys and miniature furniture for fantasy areas as well. Nine classrooms had outdoor equipment that included items such as swings, slides, tyres, tunnels and climbing structures.

In all classrooms, the equipment used by children was child-sized, accessible and safe. In two classrooms, the parts to the different educational toys were kept in labelled plastic containers. Among the educational toys observed were puzzles, lego, building straws, counting sticks, geometric shapes, dizzy discs, number bonds, wee shapes, and geominoes.

In the three classrooms, the lack of school readiness or educational materials coincided with the unavailability of adequate space as well. In one of these classrooms, the lack of space and poor layout resulted in inaccessibility to materials and equipment.

3.1.4 Environment: Atmosphere, Activities, Interactions

The range of activities that took place in the classrooms was more or less guided by the daily programme. The common activities in the daily programme included a morning ring, quiet play, toilet routine, snack or lunch, outdoor play, and, music and story ring. In some classrooms quiet play, or individual choice activities were referred to as "school readiness" because the teachers concentrated on helping children master those skills that were regarded as important for formal school.

The activities that took place were described by observers as "exciting , "stimulating , "challenging , and "appropriate for the age group . In these classrooms, most teachers had established a good rapport with the children as noted by the children talking freely to the teachers. The interactions amongst the children were friendly. All of the activities were conducted through play. Hence the atmosphere was described by observers as "relaxed , "feeling of freedom , "happy , "conducive to learning . The atmosphere in only one classroom was observed as not conducive to learning. In this classroom, children did not seem happy and only responded when spoken to.

3.2 Classroom Arrangement

The following is a drawing of one of the best equipped and well-laid out classroom.

This sub-section provides information about the classroom practice; that is, the interactions, processes and behaviours of both the teachers and the learners. The information is presented in five contexts: the whole group, small groups, snack time, free play and school readiness session. Not all the contexts were observed; for example, it was not always possible to observe free play outside because the weather sometimes did not permit this. Under each context teacher practices and learner practices are discussed.

3.3.1 Whole Group

One of the activities that involved the participation of the whole group of children was the story and music ring.

Story and Music Ring: Teacher Practices

All classes observed had a story and music ring in their daily programme. The common activities that occurred during this session were song, dance, and recitation of rhymes. Eight out of 10 teachers sat down on the floor with the children on the carpet. One of these teachers actually took off her shoes at the beginning of this activity and asked all children to do the same. One of the teachers who did not sit down with children had high-heeled shoes; the other sat on a chair while children sat on the floor.

Teachers employed different strategies as they conducted the music and story rings. Teachers led the activities. For songs and rhymes, teachers just started a song and children joined in. For other activities the teacher explained the activity, and what children would be expected to do.

The song and dance was usually integrated with different other activities, and these varied according to teacher interests. Some teachers used this activity to tell a story. The story ran throughout the activity; as the teacher told the story, children acted out parts of the story. The action sometimes entailed stretching out arms, running, walking, joining hands, turning around, and rolling down on the floor.

Three teachers conducted an activity in which children were each given a musical instrument, such as a cymbal, drums, sleigh bell, triangle and rhythm sticks. The teachers and children discussed the names of the different instruments, and how the names were derived. They talked about the different sounds made by different instruments and played games with instruments. In one class they sang together with recorded music in a cassette and played instruments as the song suggested. Teachers let children exchange instruments so that a child got a chance to play with more than one instrument each day.

In almost all classrooms teachers attempted to involve all children in song and dance activities. However, this was done in a friendly way and children were not compelled to do any of the activities. In many classrooms teachers were observed showing children affection. It was only in

a few classrooms where teachers were observed giving commands (as opposed to informing in an amicable way), restraining, reprimanding, and threatening.

Through song and dance, an integrated curriculum approach was adopted. Teachers taught many skills, such as listening and observation skills. Teachers exposed children to languages other than their home languages.

Music and Story Ring: Learner Practices

Children actively participated in reciting rhymes, songs, physical exercise, play and dance. They held hands, played together, and talked among themselves and to the teacher as they did these activities. They could follow the teacher's instructions when she said: "sit in pairs , "roll the boat , or "ride the bicycle . "Riding the bicycle meant two children holding hands and shoving their feet together in cycles. It appeared that they were thoroughly enjoying themselves.

There were specific practices and skills that children had obviously mastered through everyday practice. They could sing, recite rhymes and dance. In classrooms where they used musical instruments, children could identify instruments, properly hold them and play them. They could listen to music in a cassette, sing and dance to the tune, and follow the instructions in playing instruments that teachers had given them.

As teachers integrated song and dance with teaching certain skills, children were observed mastering some of the skills. Children could count objects; for instance, in one classroom, they correctly responded to the instruction: "make groups of seven . When there were less than five objects, children could tell how many objects were needed to bring the count to seven. In one classroom, they could each count the syllables in their own names; they clapped hands as they counted each syllable.

In all classrooms children seemed to be able to identify common colours such as red, yellow, blue, green, black and white. They could identify shapes such as triangle, square, rectangle and circle.

3.3.2 Small Group Activities

This activity took place after morning ring at about 9:00 in the morning and lasted about forty five minutes to an hour.

Teacher Practices

At the start of this period, all teachers had set out the tables and materials for small group activities. In all of the classrooms there were at least three areas for three different activities involving about six children in a group. There was a table for painting, and there were plastic or tin containers with paint, a container with brushes and sheets of paper on which to paint. In two classrooms, painting was to be carried out on a small free standing board. One table had sheets of paper, strips of colourful fabric , scissors, and glue for cutting and pasting. The third table was for free drawing and had different colours of crayons and sheets of papers. In addition to these three activities, in three classrooms there was a dough area, and the table had dough and dough cutting materials with different shapes. One classroom had a corner for baking, which was laid with ingredients, plates for each participating child, measuring spoons, and a recipe hung on the wall .

While the activities were generally the same across many schools in the way teachers managed small groups, there were two patterns that seemed to emerge from what teachers were doing. On one hand, six out of 10 teachers had prepared materials and allowed children to choose activities and to draw, paint, or construct anything they could think of. In other words there was no structure to the activities. After some time they were allowed to change to quiet areas such as book corner, fantasy corner or to play with educational materials.

On the other hand, four teachers had prepared different tasks for children to carry out. One of these tasks was baking. Baking involved following instructions and mixing specific amounts of ingredients. The teacher mainly attended to this group while other children were involved in free choice activities of drawing, cutting and pasting, and painting. The teacher ensured that every child had a turn in baking. The teacher helped children read the recipe (pictures were used for the recipe and therefore children could "read it).

The other specific activities that were prepared by the teachers involved painting or drawing on a worksheet following instructions from the teacher. For instance, children were instructed in a particular way, if this was correctly done a clear object would emerge. One teacher told children to colour all objects in any colour but blue and to colour the sea in blue.

In all of these activities, teachers gave instructions and explanations to the whole group as to what children had to do. In one classroom, the teacher actually conducted one task and illustrated on a worksheet so that they all understood what was required of them. Four teachers ensured that each child had a chance to engage in every type of activity by rotating children. One teacher did this by instructing children to go to an activity that they did not go to the previous day. Another teacher had individual children's names on each worksheet placed on different tables. Children were told to look out for worksheets with their names on them and to sit and work there.

As children were working, teachers moved about in the classroom making sure that all the children were engaged in some activity and to see if they were following instructions. As children completed painting or drawing, each one brought his or her work to the teacher. In most

cases, teachers responded positively by either praising the child or using positive guidance to help them improve their drawings. One typical response was:

"Oh it's beautiful, but I see your man does not have arms. Don't you want a man with arms?"

Teachers hung up the paintings and encouraged children to find other activities they would like to engage in next. As children moved on to quiet areas, teachers moved to them and guided and helped them in the activities such as playing with puzzles, blocks and toys in the fantasy area.

Learner Practices

Where children were free to choose activities, they immediately ran to take places in their favourite areas. Where a teacher asked them to look for their names, children could recognise their names on worksheets. Children were talking among themselves as they worked. In one classroom one group was singing a song commonly heard from the radio as they painted and drew. They shared materials such as paint, scissors, glue, and helped each other as they worked and played. They freely talked to the teacher about their paintings and drawings. In general, children were observed actively and happily involved in all activities.

As children worked in the three main activities (painting, drawing, and cutting and pasting), it was evident in many classrooms that children could follow instructions, use colour creatively, and paint clear, bold drawings. They could hold pens, crayons, scissors and paint brushes. Many children could match colours, shapes and sizes. In three classrooms where they played with dough (one teacher said she no longer let them use dough because it was no longer challenging at their age), they could cut patterns. In the baking corner, children could read the recipe and follow instructions.

After using paint, dough and crayons, children were observed taking off their aprons and washing their hands in the sink voluntarily. On completion of small group activities, children moved to the quiet areas to read books, play with building blocks, and puzzles. They constructed recognisable objects such as bridges, trucks, aircraft, houses, roads and cars with blocks and lego. In the fantasy area, they were observed playing "mom with a baby, or talking on the phone: *"hold on while I fetch a pen to write your telephone number* . Some children were observed putting together puzzles with up to 60 pieces. In some classrooms children sought permission to go to the toilet during this period; in other classrooms children went without permission.

3.3.3 Transition to and Snack Time

The mid-morning snack plus transition to snack were observed. Usually snack took place at about 10:00 or 10:30 and lasted about half an hour.

Teacher Practices

Snack time was usually preceded by toilet routine and washing of hands. In seven out of 10 classrooms, children had brought their own lunch, usually a sandwich. The centre then provided either juice or milk. In the case where a meal was provided at the centre, it was one of the three: porridge, cereal or high-protein biscuit and juice.

In general, teachers co-ordinated the activities leading to and during the snack. They prepared children by having them wash their hands before they ate. Where toilets were adjacent to the classrooms, or inside the classrooms, teachers told children to go for toilet routine and then wash their hands. In one classroom the teacher brought a bucket and swaps and passed on to children to wipe their hands.

In some classrooms, activities prior to snack and during the snack time itself seemed to be very structured, programmed and highly involved the participation of children. The following is a typical example of a highly ordered and participatory snack time:

Classroom A

It is after the small group activities, and the teacher is packing away the materials that have been used. She is assisted by the "kittens" group as she wipes the tables with handy andy and water. (The "kittens", like other groups, consist of six children. It is their turn today to help with the chores). When tables are ready, she sees to it that every child is seated on the floor and quiet. She says: " 'Cats' get your lunch and go to the table". She waits for 'cats' to sit down before she asks the second group to do the same. She watches the way children are sitting, and separates the "naughty" children. After all children are seated and ready to eat, she asks them to close their eyes and she leads grace. She observes children as they eat. After eating, teacher calls one group at a time to get up and put away the lunch boxes in their individual bags.

(This teacher explained that the small groups were not formed according to abilities, performance or any such merits. They had been formed only for organisational purpose.)

This was in stark contrast to another classroom where the snack was less ordered and children less involved in its organisation. The following describes what was observed in this classroom:

Classroom B

The teacher sits the children down in rows on the floor. She gives each child a cup of juice and a biscuit. The teacher instructs children not to make a mess by spilling the juice. She observes and reprimands the children that chat as they eat. She throws questions to the children, and listens attentively to their responses.

Learner Practices

Children went to the toilet and washed their hands before having a snack. This was generally observed where snack time did not follow toilet routine. In two classrooms, after working with paint, dough and crayons, children took off their aprons and washed their hands in the sink inside the classroom.

All children were observed eating on their own without help from the teacher. Again, the level at which children were involved in organising the snack varied from teacher to teacher. The following is an example of what went on in Classroom A where snack time was highly structured and children greatly involved:

Classroom A

The "kittens" are busy tidying up after small group activities and they are wiping the tables in preparation for mid-morning snack. Two boys bring in tables that were taken outside to make space for small group activities. They lay the tables with plates and cups. The rest of the children continue with individual free choice play in the other corner of the classroom. Later on they begin to pack away the toys and educational materials they were playing with. When all is set for a snack, the "kittens" sit down on the floor with the rest of the children. Children get up to fetch their lunch boxes from their bags when their group is called by the teacher. They sit at the table with sandwiches and juice and wait for all to settle. At teacher's instruction, they close their eyes and sing grace. They eat quietly, until teacher tells them to put away their lunch boxes. They line up in front of the sink to wash their cups and plates when they finish.

The following was observed in a classroom where the snack was organised by the teacher.

Classroom B

Children sit very quietly eating and drinking. They do not interact with the teacher or other children spontaneously while they eat. They respond to questions raised by the teacher. When children complete eating they put their cups in a dish and wander outside until they are called in again.

IV. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This exploratory study examined practices used in ten (10) Reception Year classrooms in two distinct locations within South Africa. The effort was aimed at identifying key elements that are used to ease the transition from the ECD context into a more formalized schooling context characteristic of first grade. Additionally, the study sought to examine classroom practices and processes that made up these key elements and the perceptions of Reception Year teachers with regard to the implementation of the classroom practices. Finally, the exploratory study permitted construction of instruments for use in examining the classroom practices.

What follows is based on an exploratory study conducted with solely ten classrooms using a convenience sample of Reception Year classes in urban and peri-urban areas of South Africa. As such, readers are cautioned against generalizing the findings to all Reception Year classrooms until a more thorough study is undertaken with a sample considerably representative of such educational efforts in the country.

In general, the Reception Year classrooms in this study were found to be characterized by large enrollments of children. However, these classrooms were found to have adequate space to permit movement within by the children. Finally, the classrooms were found to be child-friendly environments with child-sized equipment and children's art decorating the walls.

Teachers in this Reception Year study were found to be highly trained individuals with experience at the pre-primary level. Most had received training in the formal sector with a few teachers having received it through the informal educare sector. Teachers viewed their experience at the pre-primary level as very positive and personally rewarding. Many still had a sense of mission noting that they were there to assist in a child's development at the beginning of the educational experience.

Reception Year classrooms in this study were noted for use of a number of practices familiar to children who had experienced preschool. Teachers in this study believed that they utilized a number of practices that allowed for continuity from the ECD experience. Key elements of this continuity were as follows:

- Use of developmentally appropriate practices;
- Establishment of linkages with the home; and
- Match of teacher expectations to the developmental level of the group.

Developmentally appropriate practices: Three key types of developmentally appropriate practices were found employed in the Reception Year classrooms in this study. These were a) use of play for instruction; b) use of learning centers; and c) building linkages to the learners' homes. From the interviews, it was found that teachers believed that play was an important element in classroom instruction. Classroom observations pointed out how they were observed engaging in the **use of play** through songs, rhymes, games and in the materials selected for use by children.

As such, the practice carried over from the educare context, where play was seen as a key means of instruction (Dlamini, 1995; Chávez, Dlamini, & Moodley, 1996).

Another key component in the use of developmentally appropriate practices was the **use of learning centers**. Learning centers, it was found, were used in two principal ways. As many of the classrooms were had more than 30 children, teachers used learning centers as a classroom management strategy. Teachers worked with large numbers of learners in a classroom by grouping children and letting them work in different centers. Also, learning centers afforded children with access to learning opportunities; teachers attempted to secure equal access in the classrooms by giving everyone a chance to interact with specific materials through enacting policies of having children rotate among the different centers.

Differing contexts was a third key element believed by teachers to be important and that forms a means of continuity with the ECD context. By dividing the schedule into differing contexts and affording children the opportunity to **work in small groups**, teachers provided a means for active learning to occur. As was noted in the observations, children were busily occupied with materials and talking about the experience during small group contexts. They baked, cut, pasted or engaged in some other experiential-type of practice that afforded skill-development through practice. Additionally, most teachers had some system for rotating children to assure that each had an opportunity to experience materials in the different learning areas.

Match of Teacher Expectations and Group Capabilities: Teachers' expectations for the learners in these classrooms seemed appropriate for their developmental level. Teacher expectations included mastery of skills such as ability to follow instructions; sorting by size, shape and colour; sequencing; expressing themselves creatively; expressing curiosity; rote counting; identifying seriation; and estimating and predicting. Also, there was general agreement among teachers as to the physical and social skills the children needed to master prior to the end of the Reception Year. There was more disagreement among the teachers as to the cognitive skills required of learners at this level. While most teachers did not expect children to know how to read, a few did have this expectation, and they did use workbooks and worksheets in an effort to promote the goal.

Implication:

Teacher expectations and practices are closely tied to the developmental levels of the children. However, there does appear to be some creeping in of grade 1 practices as some of the teachers noted that they expected learners to be able to read by the end of the Reception Year and they did use workbooks and worksheets for pre-reading and pre-math. Policy-makers may need to clarify the concept of '*readiness*' to assure that the Reception Year classroom does not become simply an extension of the formal school context.

Link with Home: Another key practice in the continuity between ECD and the Reception Year classrooms as perceived and enacted by teachers in this study was the link with the child's home. All noted the importance of the link with home, and all cited meeting with relatives as the means

of assuring that link. Interestingly, only half of the schools with Reception Year classes on their grounds actually had.

Educational institutions at this level may want to recognize the importance of the link with home by enacting a policy explicitly stating that teachers are expected to develop strategies for outreach to families of children in their classrooms.

The Reception Year classrooms in this study were found to have few links with the school or the broader community in which they were situated. In fact, it was noted that unless a school was situated on the grounds of a formal school, there was unlikely to be any contact with a formal school. Thus, a critical linkage to help ease the transition for the children into the formal school context is missing.

Implication:

Teachers and other school personnel, as much from the pre-primary school context as from the formal school context, may not recognize the need to bridge the two so that information on children may be exchanged and services tailored for the incoming learners. School officials may wish to consider studies to identify successful strategies for linking with the formal schools and develop programs to disseminate information on such strategies. It may be that teachers need training in identifying and enacting strategies for establishing such links.

Reception Year teachers in this study were found to rely on checklists as an assessment tool to identify readiness. However, there is no one test or checklist that explores the multidimensional nature of "readiness".

Implication:

The Interim Policy suggests that qualitative strategies be utilized by classroom teachers to assist learners in reaching their full potential. Policy makers may want to clarify the use of checklists and other such tools to assist teachers in identifying a learner's weaknesses and to develop individualized instruction but not as tools to determine who will be promoted or held back on the basis of results on such instruments.

Teachers in Reception Year classrooms in urban areas were informed about the Interim Policy and to have better access to information and training than those in peri-urban areas.

Implication:

Policy makers may want to conduct better outreach to peri-urban and, perhaps, rural areas to improve awareness of the Interim Policy and its implications for the educational system.

Finally, the study was conducted with a small sample in selected areas of the country. This study had a very narrow focus given the time frame for its implementation. Yet it provided an important glimpse of practices and procedures in the Reception Year classrooms. Given more

time and resources future research could conduct more in-depth examinations of the various learning environments at play for children at this level.

Implication:

Future research can examine more aspects of this phenomenon including Met vs. Unmet need for services; the economic and social costs and benefits of instituting the Reception Year classroom at the national level; key areas for teacher training; quality issues related to classroom practices; which practices work better with which target segments; the effect of different types of programs on learner outcomes; the feasibility of establishing feeder schools; and/or identifying successful strategies for linking Reception Year classrooms and formal schools.

Future research will need to examine the home and community context in addition to the classroom practices to assure a holistic picture is obtained for service delivery. Research managers will need to recruit data collectors fluent in the regional dialects as well as in English. This will be especially important in conducting interviews with parents and community members.

In general, then, the Reception Year classrooms in this study were functioning in line with several key principles espoused in the Interim Policy. Among the most evident practices and processes closely matching those cited in the Interim Policy were the following:

- Curriculum focused on play and activity-based;
- Classrooms practices that promoted an interactive approach to learning;
- Classroom teaching practices based mainly on experience with others or materials rather than on lectures or workbooks; and
- Attempts to link with home and community.

These classroom practices and processes may be the easier ones to implement. Additionally, such practices may be what is given greater attention in teacher development institutions. Other policy principles such as use of home cultures, recognition of the children own knowledge and experience, or building linkages with the community and schools, may require greater attention or different strategies before these can be realized. For example, use of the children's own experience or culture in the classrooms was not a major element of the practices though it is an important part of the Interim Policy. This is also one of the practices most difficult to change given the recent history of the country and the country's focus on adults as authority figures.

Additionally, the Interim Policy poses the need to build linkages with the children's homes, schools and communities. Teachers in this study were able to build linkages with the home and, in fewer cases, with the communities. Few actually had links with the formal schools. It may be necessary to examine what inhibits teachers from carrying out this practice; at present, the obstacles may lie in the lack of feeder schools; the lack of recognition of the importance of this link; or lack of communication between informal and formal school staff. Whatever the nature of the obstacles, teachers will need help in overcoming them including identification of successful

strategies, dissemination of the information, and/or training to help teachers (both pre-primary and formal school staff) in implementing them.

Additionally, the Department of Education may want to seek in-depth information on whether the stakeholder forums designed to create collaborative conditions with provincial departments are functioning in the marginal areas of the country. Given that thrust of the Interim Policy is for the economically disadvantaged sectors of the population, it was surprising to find that the peri-urban teachers were not aware of the Interim Policy. This may point to a breakdown of the forum structure, an ineffective strategy, or a failure in outreach efforts to marginal areas.

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