

POLICY BRIEF

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STRENGTHENING THE IMPACT OF THE GRADE R PROGRAMME

By Dr Stephen Taylor

This policy brief describes the expansion of the Grade R programme in South Africa, summarises the findings of a study evaluating the impact on learners, and makes several policy recommendations based on the evaluation results.

The Grade R programme has expanded dramatically since 2001 so that approximately 95% of children attend Grade R nowadays, either in a public school or an early childhood development centre.

A recent impact evaluation conducted by independent researchers confirmed the strategic importance of providing pre-school educational opportunities.

However, the evaluation also demonstrated that the Grade R programme as implemented up until 2011 has had a limited impact on later educational development.

Improving the quality of the programme, especially in schools serving poor communities, is thus essential in future planning.

Policy recommendations include developing the professionalism of teachers, practical in-service teacher support, equipping teachers with the skills to assess the development of their learners, increasing learner access to story books, and tightening the provincial education departments' financial record keeping.

The expansion of the Grade R programme

Less than 40% of five-year-old children in South Africa were enrolled at an educational institution in 2002. This figure rose to over 80% in 2011, and continues to rise.

The largest increases were in the poorer provinces – Mpumalanga (138% increase between 2002 and 2011), North West (153%) and Northern Cape (263%).

The increase is attributed to the rollout and expansion of the Grade R programme. Between 2001 and 2012 the numbers enrolled at public ordinary schools increased threefold, from 242,000 to 768,000.

Based on data from a household survey it is estimated that 95% of current Grade 1 children have attended Grade R (at schools and institutions such as community centres).

The growing number of no-fee-paying schools and the National Schools Nutrition Programme, introduced in poorer communities, may have contributed to the increase.



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Findings from an impact evaluation of the Grade R programme

With such a large and rapid expansion in a new programme, one might expect there to be challenges with respect to the quality of the delivery of the programme, especially in the early years.

Such an expansion requires extensive infrastructural development, a new curriculum, developing and supplying material to support learning, and enough suitably qualified teachers.

Therefore, the Department of Basic Education (DBE), in partnership with the Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME) in the Presidency, commissioned an impact evaluation of the Grade R programme.

Globally, an impact evaluation that measures the change in outcomes attributed to a programme is regarded as best practice in implementing public policy.

Impact evaluations provide valuable insight into how to improve service delivery, and reveals if the desired outcomes of an intended programme are being achieved.

The impact evaluation was conducted by independent researchers at the University of Stellenbosch, and the full reports are available on the DPME website.

The importance of early learning

The evaluation included an extensive, worldwide literature review detailing evidence on early educational interventions.

This review highlights the critically important role early childhood development plays in cognitive, behavioural and social growth.

Literature shows that early educational interventions are more cost-effective than later remedial interventions, and can mitigate the educational disadvantages of poor children.

This confirms that government made the right decision to expand the Grade R programme and to focus its energies on the poorer communities.

The literature review highlights the need for a programme that is aligned with ECD pedagogical practice, not one that is merely a diluted Grade 1.

The curriculum must stipulate clear foundations for literacy and numeracy.

The programme requires active, child-centred, participatory methods that are difficult to assimilate into the school system.

Opportunities for emergent literacy development through exposure to reading, pictures and mediated explanations of text are especially important.

Early educational interventions are more cost-effective than later remedial interventions

Early childhood development (ECD) is critically important for cognitive, behavioural and social growth

An earlier South African study found that 65% of Grade R learners enter Grade 1 without the necessary skills or concepts to master reading.

Positive impacts for pre-school are more consistent and stronger than later remedial strategies, especially for children from poor home environments.

The benefits of early education need to be maintained through subsequent school experiences.

Quality is key
A quality curriculum
A quality teacher
A quality response to development needs

Although Grade R cannot overcome deeply rooted economic problems and social pathologies, a quality programme can be a powerful equaliser to reduce disadvantages. Evidence stresses that good quality ECD produces good outcomes, and that weak provision may not improve cognitive outcomes and may even foster negative outcomes like aggressive behaviour.

Quality is key: a quality curriculum, a quality teacher, and a quality response to developmental needs.

Measuring the impact of Grade R on later learning outcomes

A complex statistical method was used to estimate the effect of Grade R on learning outcomes later in primary school. Administrative data on Grade R enrolments between 2006 and 2011 were linked to the test results of children in Grades 1 to 6 as recorded in the 2012 Annual National Assessment (ANA). The dataset included test score data and information on Grade R attendance for 18,102 primary schools across South Africa. With the exception of some schools where data was missing, this effectively represented all the learners in South African primary schools.

For each grade in a particular primary school in 2012 it was possible to estimate what proportion of children had attended Grade R. For example: if in 2009 one school had 60 Grade R children, and in 2012 the same school had 100 Grade 3 children – one could roughly estimate that 60% of the class had attended Grade R. Although the estimates did not take into account grade repetition or the possibility that children may have attended Grade R at another school, they provided a possible quota. The number of children estimated to have had access to Grade R varied within schools (across grades) as many schools were introducing and expanding the Grade R programme between 2006 and 2011.

The relationship between access to Grade R and the 2012 ANA scores was examined within each school. The overall results were obtained from the average of this relationship across all schools. A more detailed explanation of the method is outlined in the full reports.

The results demonstrated an overall positive impact of Grade R on later learning outcomes in both language and mathematics. The estimated benefits were slightly larger for language than for mathematics, although in both cases the extent of the effects was small.

In some schools Grade R has contributed towards better learning, but in other schools it has not. It must not be taken for granted that Grade R is always quality Grade R.

These findings confirm there are significant challenges in ensuring instructional quality, not only in Grade R but throughout the school system, predominantly in the schools serving poor learners. In socio-economically poor schools in the poorer provinces the estimated impact of Grade R was negligible.

The finding that children in more advantaged schools benefited more from Grade R than children in poor schools should not be interpreted as evidence that Grade R is exacerbating inequality and is therefore a harmful programme. Adding an extra year of education at a well-functioning, well-resourced school will be more beneficial than an extra year at a poorly resourced and weakly functioning school. The expansion of the Grade R programme has predominantly targeted children in poor communities. The fear that affluent children will benefit more than poor children should not be a deterrent to expanding educational opportunities for many poor children.

The data analysis of the impact evaluation reflects the Grade R programme during the years 2006 to 2011.

A number of interventions to improve the quality of ECD have been initiated, and will be strengthened in the coming years. In 2010 the DBE commenced distributing resource packs to schools. The packs include workbooks for each learner, teaching guides, posters and large story books for reading and showing to the classes.

However, it cannot be assumed that recent interventions have turned the situation around. There is a need for careful planning and prospective evaluation of potential solutions in order to be able to scale up interventions that are known to be effective in poor schools.

While this recent evaluation was retrospective, the low impact of the programme indicates the importance of doing prospective evaluation – where potential policy interventions are tried and tested before inclusion in future policy decisions.

Key policy choices to be made

Should government prioritise a pre-Grade R year?

It may be premature to focus on increasing access to another year in the school system until quality improvements are achieved in the existing Grade R programme.

On the other hand, having two distinct years of pre-school education may strengthen the quality of education.

Administrative data indicates that many under-aged children attend Grade R, especially in poor schools.

This could be to obtain a meal or because there is no centrally available/affordable ECD centre.

This may weaken the delivery of the programme.

An additional pre-Grade R year, if combined with strict enforcement of age-for-grade norms, may ensure that children participate in a classroom of similarly aged peers and progress from one grade to the next at the appropriate time.

Schools should only accept pre-Grade R enrolments if there is a dedicated teacher and classroom space.

The need for a pre-Grade R year may be less if the Department of Social Development manages to extend access to other types of ECD opportunities.

Should government upgrade the qualifications and pay structure for Grade R teachers?

Improving the quality of instruction delivered by the teachers is an important priority. This will involve enhancing the professionalism of existing teachers and improving employment prospects to attract and retain the best teachers.

Upgrading the qualifications of existing teachers and offering commensurate salaries is unlikely to be a cost-effective solution in the short term. Given the limited number of training providers for the Grade R Diploma, and that training will be part time if upgrading the current teachers, it is unrealistic to expect a large proportion of teachers to achieve a higher qualification in a short period of time.

To attract and retain good teachers in Grade R, it is important that those who are qualified to teach in the Foundation Phase (Grades 1-3) receive the same remuneration as similarly qualified teachers who are teaching Grade 1.

For the sake of teachers who do not significantly upgrade their qualifications, it may be necessary to establish an alternative training method, one with on-site support that is linked to a practical qualification. A differentiated approach may be required, perhaps with variation in what Grade R teachers are paid.

Recommendations for improving the quality of Grade R

Interim Grade R policy

An interim Grade R policy should be developed and submitted to Cabinet. The policy should clearly stipulate:

- age of admission/school readiness
- role of community-based sites
- funding
- employment of teachers
- infrastructure
- learners with disabilities.

These recommendations were proposed in the improvement plan that was drafted in response to the impact evaluation.

Improve financial record keeping of provincial expenditure on Grade R

It is difficult to establish how much government spends on the Grade R programme due to the provincial education departments' inconsistent and inaccurate record keeping. Some provinces report a very low per pupil spend, possibly because of cross-subsidisation from other spending programmes or anomalies in how Grade R spending is categorised. Provincial financial record keeping should be addressed urgently and regularly analysed to inform planning.

Increase opportunities for in-service teacher training with on-site support

In-service teacher training opportunities need to be increased.

The focus should be on providing teachers with practical strategies that support early learning and opportunities to observe and practise best teaching.

The training should include observations, simulations, roleplay and practice in contextually appropriate model environments. This needs to be supported with on-going, on-site mentoring. While it may not be feasible to provide good quality on-site support at full scale, it could be considered in a limited section of high-priority schools, such as quintile 1 schools, in certain provinces. Less costly teacher support innovations, like resource packs with a practical focus on instructional methods, need to be developed.

Increase access to reading materials

Culturally relevant story books in all South African languages should be widely available to parents/caregivers (in particular through community libraries), and in Grade R classrooms.

Develop and implement a school readiness test

A high quality school readiness test should be developed or identified and used by teachers to assess the development of their children. The use of this tool will raise awareness among schools, parents and teachers that clear developmental outcomes are expected during Grade R. It is not acceptable for children to simply attend a type of crèche.

Stephen Taylor is a researcher and advisor in the office of the Director General, Department of Basic Education.

The views expressed in this policy brief are those of the author, and should be referenced as such. The detailed evaluation report can be accessed at goo.gl/5Vk0xt.