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Learners Learning Experiences in the GET Band in a Rural Primary School: An Intellectual Wellness Perspective

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ABSTRACT This paper focuses on the experiences of the learners in a General Education and Training Band (GET Band) in a rural primary school. The study focused on their learning in Mathematics, Home language, English and Natural Science and how learners perceived their schooling. The aim of the study was to find out factors that brought challenges in their learning experience. Hetler's wellness theory was used as a lens to help us understand the learning experiences of learners. A qualitative approach was followed and purposive sampling was used for the selection of the participants, and we finally ended up with five learners from Grade 3 and five from Grade 6. In collecting data interviews were held with participants. Findings revealed that learners enjoyed lessons which were full of actions, humour, clear explanations, the use of dictionary, use of workbooks. Furthermore findings also revealed that learners resented the use of corporal punishment, bullying in the school, and ridicule from teachers. In conclusion, we argue that the learners were able to give us enough ideas that will improve the situation for better academic achievement and healthy relations between teachers and learners.

INTRODUCTION

Poor learner performance is one of the major concerns for the South African education system. It has been attributed to different issues such as learners' social and economic circumstances lack of learner support materials and related resources, overcrowding; lack of teachers' and learners' discipline and commitment, to mention but a few (Legotlo, Maaga & Sebego, 2002; Simkins & Paterson, 2005; Legotlo & Van der Westhuizen, 1996). For example, Rockoff (2004) indicates that some education stakeholders hold assumptions that students perform better when their teachers have more desirable characteristics. One of the characteristics that teachers may hold is that of having received quality education and training in the subjects they teach and at the levels/phases in which they are placed. However, it has become a norm for discussions concerning poor learner performance to only refer to matric results and to disregard primary school performance. This is despite the findings that "quality in the majority of primary schools remains poor" (Chisholm, 2004:5). Soobrayan, the Director General of Basic Education alleged that up to now there has been insufficient credible measurement of the quality of teaching and learning below Grade 12. Although this tendency seems to be changing, with the Department of Basic Education putting more emphasis on improving primary school education in South Africa, not enough has been done to examine the root of poor learner performance in primary schools in South Africa. There were efforts to improve the quality of education by focusing on literacy and numeracy and the introduction of Annual National Assessment in lower grades (South African Government Information, 2012/2013). Though these ANA were implemented in 2010 there are challenges associated with the whole process of assessment. Findings of these ANA results indicated that learners cannot spell count or understand what they read (Masondo City Press, 21 July 2013). If the results clearly indicate that learners in South African schools cannot spell and count it points to the teachers in the grades that were assessed. Masondo (2013) further indicated that the researchers revealed that teachers who were not experts in subjects like Maths and Language were expected to teach those subjects and that was a major challenge in primary schools. Masondo (City Press 21 July 2013) blamed the teachers who lack the skill to deliver the content. Davids in The Times (25 April 2013) reported that in South Africa there are still schools with a teacher learner ratio of 1:100 and teachers are expected to manage those learners. Furthermore there are no resources like furniture learners sit on bricks, mud classrooms, lack of textbooks and appalling conditions. The Policsweb (31 August 2012) in its report argue that the performance of South African primary schools as it is viewed in international and regional context it is seen as a national shame.

Context of how Learners Learn and Implications for Teaching

Studies conducted by Taylor and Vinjevoold (1999) indicated that reading and writing in South African schools was constrained by lack of textbooks and very little learning occurred in some schools. Teachers were implementing the new curriculum using learner-centred approach and co-operative learning, but there were many challenges which were experienced especially in black schools. The way in which learners learn is determined by a number of factors such as pace, differentiation, curriculum coverage, Taylor (2007); home environment, the schools' atmosphere which has a number of factors that may contribute positively or negatively towards learning. The Khanyisa Education Support programme studied 24 primary schools in Limpopo province in which classroom practices were observed (Taylor & Moyane, 2005). Findings of that programme revealed that at Grade 3 level there were low levels of cognitive demands, chorsing, slow pacing and the quantity and quality of reading and writing were not up to standard.

Language plays a significant role in the teaching and learning environment. A study by Lambani and Mangena-Netshikweta (2013) on the use of English in primary schools indicated that learners lacked the conceptual awareness and understanding in learning especially in rural black schools. The study aptly described how the intellectual wellness of learners may be affected by lack of understanding English as a second language. For learners to understand concepts as Swart (1989) highlights occurs when learners observe and interacts with learners who are experienced, in that way they receive help and understand easily. Learners should know the concepts of what they learn and be able to recode the information required for a specific learning task (Lambani&Mangena-Netshikweta, 2013). Learners learn through a process of first being exposed to new knowledge and then attempting to make sense of that new knowledge in terms of their existing knowledge. The link between new and old knowledge must be established by the teacher since the teacher understands the background and the context where learners come from. In the Primary school teachers should always make use of media that is familiar to learners especially in subjects like numeracy or Mathematics which may be complex if it made to be abstract. Objects that learners know should be brought to class to facilitate learning in linking new knowledge to what the learner already knows. Setati and Adler (2000) point out that code switching is used in classrooms where English is not a home language. Code switching and language translation takes time which the pacing of the curriculum may not allow. Setati, Adler, Reed and Bapoo (2002) also found that rural learners were not exposed to the English language due to lack of resources

such as television, newspapers and radios and this impacted more on their intellectual wellness.

Apart from language and concepts that learners are exposed to in the classroom, their intellectual wellness is also enhanced by their learning styles. These learning styles may be looked from the theory of Howard Gardner of Multiple intelligence (Killen, 2007). The intelligences are linguistic, logical –mathematical, spatial, musical, kinaesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal and naturalistic. These types of intelligences are to be observed by all teachers in the teaching and learning environment so that they prepare lessons based on the types of learners that they have in their classrooms. From White paper six of (2001) on Inclusive Education “all children can learn” (Department of Education, 2001). Learners can find comfort of learning all subjects in a primary school if they type of intelligence and learning styles are taken cognisance of, failure to do so may result in frustration during periods and the intellectual wellness may not be enhanced.

Rationale and Motivation for the study

There is an outcry that schools are not performing well in Natural Science, Mathematics and Languages. The proposed project aimed at finding out the causes of under-performance in these learning areas focusing on grades 3 and 6. This paper is based on the learners learning experiences in the General Education and Training Band in a rural setting in the village of Marapyane in Mpumalanga Province. This school was one of the 500 schools selected by the Department of Basic Education as in dire need of assistance in the learning areas like: Home Language, First Additional Language, Natural Science and Mathematics. Unisa was mandated to empower and capacitate the teachers of the selected schools in the mentioned learning areas. Through the Annual National Assessment (ANA), learner performance on a national scale was assessed at Grades 3 and 6; and to say the least, the results of the learners were shocking particularly in the above-mentioned Subjects. To carry out the Department of Basic Education and Training mandate, Unisa through its College of Education visited the selected schools through teams of researchers who were specifically briefed to conduct research involving the following stakeholders: the learners, parents, teachers and school management team. The underperforming primary schools were identified after the Annual National Assessments were conducted in subjects such as Mathematics, Home Language, First Additional Language and Natural Science. This paper focuses only on the experiences of the learners in the abovementioned subjects. Hence the research question for this study was:

How are the experiences of learners in a rural primary school?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

For the purpose of the current study we used an intellectual wellness as a lens in order to be able to articulate the learning experiences of primary school learners in a rural setting. An intellectual wellness for primary school learners is important and form an integral part of their learning, since an intellectual wellness is defined by Ballentine (2010); and Akey (2006) as attending school, going to all classes, arriving on time, having access to, and doing well in academically challenging courses, having opportunities to apply knowledge, reading at a grade level identified obtaining good grades and served for any special needs. Additionally, academic achievement of a learner occurs within the construct of wellness for a learner (Ballentine, 2010).

Moreover, academic (intellectual) wellness model developed by Hettler (1980), states that academic (intellectual) wellness is the level that one engages in creative and stimulating activities, as well as the use of resources to expand knowledge and focus on the achievement, development, application, and extend of critical thinking, along with expanding his potential for sharing knowledge with others. Also Hollingsworth (2009) articulates wellness as “an active process through which people become aware of, and make choices about, a more successful existence”. In this paper the intellectual wellness of learners was closely interrogated or looked at how learners perceive their learning in subjects like Mathematics, Home Language, English and Natural Science at Grade 3 and Grade 6 level.

METHOD

The study was embedded within an interpretive paradigm which requires the researchers to interpret the phenomena in its naturalistic format. This study followed a qualitative research design which is defined by Henning et al (2004) as a means of exploring and understanding the groups or individuals ascribed to a social or human problem, in this context learner' experiences. We followed a qualitative research since we were interested in an in-depth data. In the quest to get in-depth data we wanted to unveil a real world situation that exists by exploring the experiences of primary school learners in a rural area following guidelines highlighted by Schumacher and MacMillan (1997). Since we were exploring experiences of

learners we used a phenomenological approach which enabled us to obtain a deeper understanding and new knowledge of what it is like to learn in a rural setting. A phenomenological inquiry focuses on the essence or structure of an experience (Merriam, 2002). We were able to look beyond a mere experience of learning in a rural setting and we looked for a much deeper goal.

As the focus was on primary school learners in a rural area in Mpumalanga province, we focused only on one school. Access to the research site was obtained from Mpumalanga Department of Education and Unisa research ethics committee. Furthermore the principal permitted us and consent and assent letters were signed by the parents and learners. The letters clearly explained the purpose of the study and the proceedings and whether they agree to be audio taped. Voluntary participation was also emphasised by the researchers. The participants in this study were five Grade 3 and five Grade 6 learners.

The research instrument was interview questions which were mainly prepared for focus group discussions and all open-ended.

The questions for focus groups covered aspects of learning; such as the *things that teachers do that help learners to learn best, things that teachers do that make it difficult for learners to learn, what learners find difficult to understand in mathematics class, the kind of teachers that they like, difficulties in science, First additional language (English), home language (Setswana) and what they like or don't like about coming to class.*

The focus group discussion lasted for an hour and throughout the discussions the participants names were not used but they were given alphabets and called according to the alphabet they had. Participants were allowed to drink water or fruit juice since for a grade 3 and 6 learner an hour can be tiring and their concentration span is limited. To ensure that there was order there was one moderator (facilitator or interviewee) who lead the discussions and there were four observers who were taking notes and observing cues, or gestures made by learners. Although we had a digital voice recorder the observers were also taking field notes to ensure that we capture the entire discussions of the focus group. Learners were allowed to use either Setswana or English so that they could express themselves better.

Data Analysis: We followed Creswell's (2009) steps in analysing data. The initial step was to transcribe the focus group discussions onto an MS Word document. The transcripts were thoroughly read by the researchers so that we could make a general sense of the data and verify what could have been missed during the discussion process. Of importance was to get the overall depth, and credibility of the information (Creswell 2009). We coded the data manually, identified patterns and categorised data. We read the entire list of codes and

categories that we formed and tried to get some sense and whether there was coherence (Henning et al 2004). We then grouped categories with similar meanings and from the clustered categories the following themes emerged:

- Best practices that teachers do which enhances learning
- Factors that cause barriers to learning from teachers and learners
- Difficulties in Maths, Science and home language
- What learners enjoy at school
- What learners do not enjoy at school

Best practices that teachers do which enhances learning: Learners experiences with regard to teachers way of engaging with the learning content evolved around the use of creative teaching using humour in explaining concepts and the use of a dictionary. It was clear from the focus groups that they were able to grasp the content from the teachers who were in a position to detail their explanations and those who went an extra mile.

Factors that cause barriers to learning from teachers and learners: From the discussions it was clear that teachers who were shouting at learners caused a barrier in the learning process. Learners disliked to stand in front of other learners in class and be ridiculed. They really expressed disgust feelings about how they felt when teachers were scolding them for not being able to provide correct answers.

Difficulties in Maths, Science and home language: Another barrier was in the Subject of Mathematics almost all ten participants expressed that division, multiplication subtraction and addition of 'big numbers' fractions and differentiating between (millimetres) mm and (centimetres) cm was difficult for them. What made matters worse was that there was corporal punishment during Mathematics periods which made it difficult for them to concentrate since they were scared that the teacher will beat them. One learner said: '*sometimes you are given five seconds to give an answer if you don't know you must stand up until the period ends.*'

In Science classes terminology was difficult and there was lack of detailed explanation for scientific processes from the teacher. The confusion was evident when two grade 6 learner said:

'when they teach about gas in the books it looks like it is flowing but we are not able to draw it in our books'

'we don't understand how the nutrients are absorbed by plants, what are nutrients'

Another difficulty experienced by learners was expressed by learners in English with the vocabulary appropriate for a grade 3 and grade 6 learner. Learners alluded the problem to lack of dictionaries and that teachers scold at them that they do not write at the level of a grade 3 or grade 6 learner. Home language which is Setswana had difficulties also. Learners experienced challenges with the understanding of idioms and proverbs since some of them were not speaking Setswana from their homes.

What learners enjoy at school: Learners preferred kind, understanding and patient teachers. They wanted to have teachers who can always avail their assistance and not beat them. One learner said: *'we don't want angry teachers'*

Furthermore learners expressed that they enjoy working with work books provided by the Department of Education since they were able to use them at home even when they were bored they would read alone. Both grade 3 and grade 6 enjoyed coming to school when their homework was done. Though they are in a rural area with limited facilities those learners had aspirations and they said they enjoy coming to school because they had goals in life, wanted to excel and go to university one day. One said: *'I enjoy coming to school so that my dream can come true- to play soccer'*

Of importance they expressed that coming to school is important since they felt that they are protected from drugs, rape and child trafficking .

What learners do not enjoy at school: Bullying was a major problem in that school which made learners not to enjoy coming to school. There was failure from the teachers to deal with bullying and this causes disturbances even during lessons. The problem of bullies was pointed out in this manner:

'other learners are troublesome, they do nasty things in the class and they disturb us'

'some learners disturb us in class, at times they force us to dance while the teacher is in class. If you don't dance you pay fifty cents or ten rands, if you don't have the money they beat you ten times on your back'

'sometimes they take your food for lunch, take pens and books and throw them away'

'if you are a top achiever bullies take your books and pens so that they can get your position'

Some of the things which caused learners not to enjoy coming to school is the nasty jokes made by teachers. Some of the jokes were about learners' physical features which made them to feel bad.

DISCUSSION

Best practices that teachers do which enhances learning: The ethos of care still remains the most important element in the teaching and learning environment. As findings indicated they liked teachers who were patient, kind who went to greater lengths in explaining concepts and even using humour. These shows that the pastoral care role of a teacher is seen as the most important aspect in the teaching and learning environment. Even though the school lacked resources learners expected to have teachers who went an extra mile to explain concepts and simplified the subject matter. It seems as though abstract concept needed more attention in this school, teachers were not supposed to make assumptions that learners understood.

Factors that cause barriers to learning from teachers and learners: Findings of the current study are similar to what Legotlo et al (2002); Simkins and Paterson (2005) and Legotlo and Van der Westhuizen(1996) found regarding poor learner performance. The learners indicated that they lack dictionaries hence they don't have enough vocabulary for the First Additional Language (English). Another problem is that one of teacher quality and in the current study teachers were using corporal punishment and ridicule which in a way lowers learners' self-esteem. Division, multiplication, subtraction, addition seemed to be a problem which raises a serious concern for the pedagogic content knowledge in Mathematics.

Difficulties in Maths, Science and home language: The findings indicated that there were difficulties or barriers in the subject of Mathematics, Science and Home language. From the learners perspective it is clear that conceptualisation and lack of understanding was a major challenge. This can be better clarified by what Shulman (1987) calls pedagogic content knowledge (PCK) which represents teachers' ability to convey the underlying details and constructs in their field of specialisation and simplify the matter to students. The findings indicated that there was lack of understanding of basic concepts in Mathematics and Science. As researchers we interpreted the situation that the teacher could not reach the level of learners and helped them to understand instead teachers resorted to corporal punishment. Teachers may know the subject but as Bucat (2005) pointed out that there is a vast difference between knowing about a topic and how one teaches and help others to learn.

What learners enjoy at school: The Department of Basic Education contributed positively in the education of learners in the primary schools by providing workbooks. The findings of the current study revealed that learners enjoyed reading their workbooks even during weekends when they were at home. The area where the study was conducted lacks recreational facilities, hence for primary school learners the workbooks are keeping them busy. They enjoyed days of educational excursions since they were going to learn away from their familiar environment. This clearly indicates that learners' minds needed some extra stimuli.

Frederick (2012) pointed out that while the classroom is the perfect place to learn the fundamental concepts of each school subject, this is simply not enough on its own. Educational trips show students how their subjects apply to the real world. There's no doubt that these kinds of school tours contribute to the development of skills and the acquisition of knowledge. Studies of languages, science, the arts, geography and history can all be greatly enhanced outside of the classroom. Due to poverty in the area where research was conducted such tours would be limited.

What learners do not enjoy at school: It was evident in this study that learners were troubled by bullies and this lowered their learning in classrooms and reduced their joy of coming to school. What is bothering is that the teachers were helpless in rescuing the situation. The findings of this study are in line with previous research which revealed that where bullying is rampant there will be truancy (Sullivan 2000). What is worrisome is when the food for lunch is taken by bullies and teachers were not in a position to help. There was also physical and non-physical bullying in the rural primary school and these findings are similar to what Gleason (2011) found where acts of bullying such as hitting, kicking, teasing and manipulation were experienced amongst learners.

Findings revealed that learners were experiencing corporal punishment, humiliation from the teachers and when parents tried to intervene learners faced a serious exclusion from the teachers. This is contradicting the Constitution of South Africa (1996) which is emphasising that no child should face discrimination.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion we argue that the learners were able to pinpoint factors that contributed positively to their academic wellness and factors that enhanced their learning. Since learners were free to share their learning experiences they were able to give also the negative experiences which actually exposed the factors that contributed to their ill performance in their learning. Issues of the use of corporal punishment, bullying from other learners and the school is reluctant in dealing with the issue affects the academic performance of learners. Teachers choose to ignore the South African School's Act (1996); and decided to punish learners, this shows that there is a need for intervention. Learners highlighted that they are forced to memorise the workbooks in certain subjects and they must recite verbatim, this indicates lack of skill on the side of the teacher to teach the pedagogic content knowledge. Teachers could play a positive role in enhancing the intellectual wellness of learners. What

was positive from the learners' experiences is that the school is seen as a haven where they are protected from rapes, bullying and child trafficking that occurs in the village.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We recommend that in order to assist learners to do well in all their subjects the teachers should be skilful and attend In-service training courses in order to get more knowledge in their subjects. The Department of Basic Education should be able support teachers in using the workbooks and provide more books so that every learner can have his/her own copy. Teachers should familiarise themselves with new approaches in disseminating or facilitating new content, do more research and teach in a skilful way and avoid making learners to use rote learning memorising workbooks. Teachers should also focus on the methods that learners enjoy eg the use of actions or humour, the use of dictionaries and detailed explanations. Of importance the use of corporal punishment should be avoided at all costs, learners who are scared and tense won't be able to grasp any content during the lesson.

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