

**INVESTIGATING THE NEEDS AND CHALLENGES OF  
UNDERACHIEVING GRADE R LEARNERS IN A  
MITCHELL'S PLAIN PRIMARY SCHOOL**

**by**

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## DECLARATION

I declare that **“INVESTIGATING THE NEEDS AND CHALLENGES OF UNDERACHIEVING GRADE R LEARNERS IN A MITCHELL’S PLAIN PRIMARY SCHOOL”** is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

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**FILANDER B (Mrs)**

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**DATE**

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God has been my pillar of strength and I am grateful to Him for giving me the strength, courage and perseverance to complete this study. My sincere and heartfelt gratitude goes to:

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- Lastly, to those who contributed to making this research studies a success.

God bless you all.

## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this dissertation

to

my late father, **John Raven Daniels**

and

my mother, **Magdalene Daniels**

Thank you for the foundation you laid in my life.  
It is through your prayers and many teachings that I am where I am today.

I love you.

## **Abstract**

Many learners enter Grade 1 underprepared, because they have not had the chance to develop the necessary skills, values or attitudes expected of learners in this year. This results in academic backlogs and school underachievement, with many learners from poor socio-economic backgrounds in which poverty and unemployment are rife. Early identification of gaps in their learning as well as the support is crucial. Landsberg (2005, p.80) states that addressing early intervention implies not only a focus on the child and the needs of children but also facilitation of the environment in which they live. Against this background the study aims to investigate the needs and challenges of underachieving Grade R learners in a Mitchell's Plain primary school. A phenomenological qualitative research approach was adopted, using purposeful sampling to obtain participants, and semi-structured interviews, observations and documents to collect data from two Grade R practitioners. A thematic document analysis of 20 underachieving Grade R learners followed to support the findings. The researcher argues that not enough support is being provided for these learners; hence the study seeks to determine their needs and challenges in the school. It is believed that the findings will contribute meaningfully by making recommendations for focused support for these learners.

**KEY WORDS:** Underachievement; Grade R; Grade R learner; early childhood development; practitioner; needs; challenges; barriers to learning; parental involvement; support.

## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS USED IN THIS STUDY**

CAPS	: Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement
DBE	: Department of Basic Education
DoE	: Department of Education
DoSD	: Department of Social Development
ECD	: Early Childhood Development
IE	: Inclusive Education
IWP 5	: Education White Paper 5 on Early Childhood Development
EWP 6	: Education White Paper 6 on Special Needs Education: Building an Inclusive Education and Training
LOLT	: Language of Learning and Teaching
HOD	: Head of Department
MSED	: Metro South Education District
NCS	: National Curriculum Statement
NCESS	: National Committee on Education Support Services
NCSNET	: National Commission on Special Needs Education and Training
NIP	: National Integrated Plan
SASA	: South African Schools Act
SED	: Scottish Education Department
SMT	: Senior Management Team
UNESCO	: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNICEF	: United Nations Children's Fund
WCED	: Western Cape Education Department

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
Declaration	i
Acknowledgements	ii
Dedication	iii
Abstract	iv
List of abbreviations and acronyms	v
<b>CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY</b>	
1.1 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY	1
1.2 MOTIVATION TO EMBARK ON THE STUDY	3
1.3 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM	3
1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS	4
1.5 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY	4
1.6 LITERATURE REVIEW	5
1.7 DELIMITATION OF THE STUDY	9
1.8 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	9
1.9 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY	10
1.9.1 Research paradigm	10
1.9.2 Research design	11
1.9.3 Site	11
1.9.4 Sampling	12
1.10 DATA COLLECTION METHODS	12
1.10.1 Interviews	12
1.10.2 Observations	13
1.10.3 Documents	13
1.11 VALIDITY AND TRUSTWORTHINESS	13
1.11.1 Validity	14
1.11.2 Trustworthiness	14
i) Credibility	14
ii) Dependability	15
iii) Authenticity	15
1.12 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS	15
1.13 DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS IN THE STUDY	16

1.14 OUTLINE OF THE STUDY	18
1.15 CONCLUDING REMARKS	18
<b>CHAPTER TWO: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW</b>	
2.1 INTRODUCTION	19
2.2 BRONFENBRENNER'S ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS THEORY	20
2.2.1 Micro-system	21
2.2.2 Meso system	22
2.2.3 Exo system	22
2.2.4 Macro system	23
2.3 THEORIES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT	23
2.4 LITERATURE REVIEW	27
2.4.1 Concept of underachievement	27
2.4.1.1 Factors related to the individual	31
2.4.1.2 Family factors	32
2.4.1.3 Community and Societal factors	32
2.4.1.4 School characteristics	32
2.4.2 Triarchic Model of Minority Children's School Achievement	33
2.5 EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION	35
2.5.1 Benefits of Early Childhood Education	36
2.5.2 School readiness	36
2.5.3 Access to Grade R	37
2.6 EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTH AFRICA	37
2.6.1 Early Childhood Development since 1994 and beyond	37
2.6.2 Access to quality Early Childhood Development in the Western Cape	39
2.6.3 Challenges in Early Childhood Development	40
2.7 POLICIES IMPACTING ON GRADE R	41
2.7.1 Education White Paper 5	41
2.7.2 Education White Paper 6	41
2.7.3 Language Policy	44
2.7.4 Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement(CAPS)	44
2.8 GRADE R LEARNER	45
2.8.1 Learner needs	45



2.9	EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT PRACTITIONERS	46
2.9.1	Role of Grade R practitioners in the developmental process	47
2.10	LEARNING ENVIRONMENT	48
2.11	ROLE OF PARENTS	49
2.11.1	Parental recognition and involvement	50
2.12	BARRIERS TO LEARNING	50
2.12.1	Socio-economic barriers	51
2.12.2	Poverty and under development	52
2.12.3	Attitudes	53
2.12.4	Curriculum	53
2.13	CARE AND SUPPORT FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING	54
2.14	CONCLUDING REMARKS	55
<b>CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY</b>		
3.1	INTRODUCTION	56
3.2	RESEARCH CONTEXT	56
3.3	RESEARCH PARADIGM	57
3.4	THE RESEARCH DESIGN	58
3.4.1	Qualitative research approach	59
3.4.2	Role of the researcher	60
3.4.3	Site	60
3.4.4	Sample	61
3.5	DATA COLLECTION STRATEGIES	61
3.5.1	Observations	61
3.5.2	Participant observation	62
3.5.3	Interviewing	63
3.5.4	Documents	64
3.6	ANALYSIS OF DATA	64
3.7	REPORTING THE FINDINGS	65
3.8	VERIFICATION	66
3.8.1	Validity	66
3.8.2	Credibility	66
3.8.3	Triangulation	66

3.9	ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS	67
3.9.1	Informed consent	67
3.9.2	Approval	67
3.9.3	Confidentiality	68
3.10	CONCLUDING REMARKS	68
<b>CHAPTER FOUR: PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSIONS OF RESULTS</b>		
4.1	INTRODUCTION	69
4.2	BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS	69
4.3	PRESENTATION OF THE RESULTS	70
4.4	THEME 1: NEEDS OF UNDERACHIEVING GRADE R LEARNERS	71
4.4.1	Grade R practitioners' responses to in- depth interviews on needs of underachieving Grade R learners	71
	4.4.1.1 Lack of resources	71
	4.4.1.2 Need for furniture	72
	4.4.1.3 Need for parental support	72
4.4.2	Observations on needs of underachieving Grade R learners	73
4.4.3	Document analysis on needs of underachieving Grade R learners	73
4.5	THEME 2: CHALLENGES OF UNDERACHIEVING GRADE R LEARNERS	75
4.5.1	Grade R practitioners' responses to in-depth interviews on challenges of underachieving Grade R learners	75
	4.5.1.1 Language of learning and teaching (LoLT)	75
	4.5.1.2 Lack of language and vocabulary	76
	4.5.1.3 Lack of practitioner knowledge to support the underachieving Grade R learners	77
	4.5.1.4 Lack of support from education managers	78
	4.5.1.5 Parental involvement	80
4.5.2	Document analysis on challenges of underachieving Grade R learners	81
4.5.3	Observations on challenges of underachieving learners	82

4.6	THEME 3: FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO UNDERACHIEVEMENT OF GRADE R LEARNERS	85
4.6.1	Document analysis on factors contributing to the academic underachievement of Grade R learners	85
4.6.1.1	Planning	85
4.6.1.2	Assessment	86
4.6.1.3	Learner profiles	86
4.6.2	Grade R practitioners' responses to in –depth interviews on factors contributing to the underachievement of Grade R learners	87
4.6.2.1	Lack of perceptual skills	87
4.6.2.2	Planning	88
4.6.2.3	Assessment	88
4.6.3	Observations on factors contributing to the underachievement of Grade R learners	89
4.6.3.1	The learning environment	89
4.6.3.2	The daily timetable	90
4.6.3.3	Classroom/social interactions	90
4.6.3.4	Language and communication	91
4.7	THEME 4: STRATEGIES GRADE R PRACTITIONERS CURRENTLY USE TO SUPPORT THE UNDERACHIEVING GRADE R LEARNERS	94
4.7.1	Grade R practitioners' responses to in-depth interviews on strategies they currently use to support the underachieving Grade R learners	94
4.7.2	Document analysis on strategies Grade R practitioners currently use to support underachieving Grade R learners	94
4.7.3	Observations on strategies Grade R practitioners currently use to support underachieving Grade R learners	95
4.8	POSSIBLE STRATEGIES TO ASSIST UNDERACHIEVING GRADE R LEARNERS	96
4.8.1	Strategies Grade R practitioners can employ to assist underachieving Grade R learners:	96
a)	gross motor development	96

b)	fine motor development	96
c)	remember little/nothing	98
d)	unable to differentiate between past/present	98
e)	clumsy and finding a range of movements difficult	99
f)	only uses single words	99
g)	is shy and withdrawn – avoids eye contact	99
h)	has behaviour challenges	99
i)	has difficulty with hand-eye co-ordination	100
4.9	CONCLUDING REMARKS	100
<b>CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS</b>		
5.1	INTRODUCTION	102
5.2	SUMMARY OF FINDINGS	103
5.2.1	Findings on needs of underachieving Grade R learners	105
5.2.2	Findings on challenges of underachieving Grade R learners	107
5.2.3	Findings on factors contributing to the underachievement of Grade R learners	109
5.2.4	Findings on strategies Grade R practitioners currently use to assist underachieving Grade R learners	112
5.3	RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH	113
5.3.1	Formal training programmes for Grade R practitioners	113
5.3.2	Collaboration between stakeholders	113
5.3.3	Psycho social and physical learning environment	113
5.4	LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY	113
5.5	FINAL REMARKS	115
	REFERENCES	116

APPENDIX A

APPENDIX B

APPENDIX C

APPENDIX D

APPENDIX E

APPENDIX F

APPENDIX G

APPENDIX H

APPENDIX I

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

#### 1.1 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

As Rossi and Stuart (2007, p.139) observed, “Many learners are at a disadvantage when they enter school, because they have not had the chance to develop skills, values and attitudes expected of learners in the first grade.” Most residents of Mitchell’s Plain, South Africa, are poverty stricken, with unemployment rife, coupled with unhealthy living conditions, drug abuse and a high crime rate. Many houses are overcrowded and poorly resourced, the majority being home to single-parent and/or large families with parents who have low levels of education. Because of these socio-economic conditions, schools are faced with severe barriers to learning and teaching challenges. “In any institution there will be a diverse group of learners who experience different barriers to learning and have diverse needs” (Links, 2009, p.12), but approximately 40 percent of young children in South Africa grow up in conditions of poverty and neglect (Education White Paper 5, 2001), and from personal observation the failure and dropout rate of learners at many primary schools is on the increase.

Grade R is not compulsory within the Department of Education (DoE), and therefore learners who experience barriers to learning and development, including those from disadvantage backgrounds, enter Grade 1 underprepared for formal schooling. An assessment of Grade R learners by the Western Cape Education Department in 2011 and 2012 showed that the majority in the Metro South Education District (MSED) presented with wide developmental gaps and were not ready for formal schooling. With this assessment it was evident that they had a range of diverse learning needs, either *extrinsic* or *intrinsic*.

Extrinsic barriers are those that are located outside the learner and over which he/she has no control over, for example the home, environment, school, system, language of learning and teaching (LoLT), poverty and poor socio-economic circumstances. These factors have a direct impact on the learners’ development and learning, and ultimately result in barriers to learning and development. Intrinsic barriers, on the other hand, are located within the learner, *inter alia*, premature birth and genetic factors (Landsberg,

2005). Since “A barrier intrinsic to the learner can be a disability or backlog in academic performance due to certain extrinsic barriers” (Links, 2009, p.12), learners, who are not identified early and given the appropriate support can experience barriers to learning and development.

According to the Education White Paper 6 (EWP 6) on Inclusive Education and Training Policy that was released in 2001 by the DoE, these learners have to be accommodated in the mainstream classroom. EWP 6 further states that it is the basic human right of a learner to be included in the regular school of his/her choice. Inclusive Education (IE) has been defined as “educational policies and practices that uphold the rights of learners with barriers to learning to also belong and learn in the mainstream class” (Engelbrecht & Green, 2001, p.4), whilst the Republic’s Constitution (Act No 108, Section 29, Subsection 1 1996) states that all citizens have the right to basic and further education. In line with this, one of the principles of EWP 6 is that all youths can learn and that all learners at some stage need support.

The National Curriculum Statement (NCS) Grades R-12:

...serves the purpose of equipping learners, irrespective of their socio-economic background, race, gender, physical ability or intellectual ability, with knowledge, skills and values necessary for self-fulfilment, and meaningful participation in society as citizens of a free country (National Curriculum Statement).

All learners have strengths and weaknesses on which to build their self-esteem and develop holistically.

As the first year of the Foundation Phase and last year of pre-primary, Grade R lays the foundation blocks for learning Grades 1-3, so the learners need to be skilled and developed for future learning in literacy and numeracy so early identification of gaps in their learning and the support thereof is crucial. Landsberg (2005, p.80), states that addressing early intervention implies not only focus on the child and the needs of children but also facilitating the environment in which the children live.

It is evident that Grade R practitioners and classroom teachers who have learners experiencing barriers to learning and development should be knowledgeable, skilled and, above all, have the right attitude to teach and guide these academic underachieving learners in the education system. Parents also play a crucial role in

their child's education, and as Landsberg (2005, p.84) states, both groups work together in early childhood settings they impact on the child's development and learning multiplies.

This forms the background for the research, the focus of which is therefore to investigate the needs and challenges of underachieving Grade R learners in a Mitchell's Plain primary school.

## **1.2 MOTIVATION TO EMBARK ON THE STUDY**

Motivation to embark on this study arose after it was noted that many learners in the Metro South Education District were experiencing barriers to learning and development as early as Grade R. As an official of the Western Cape Education Department (WEDC), the researcher was directly involved in the monitoring of their assessment in 2011 and 2012, the results from which revealed a serious level of under-preparedness for learners' formal schooling. This triggered my interest.

During my interaction with this particular school I became aware that an increasing number of learners entering Grade R were experiencing barriers to learning and development and were therefore academically underachieving. For the previous two years there had been a high failure rate in Grade 1, a serious cause for concern.

A key objective of my job as official was to ensure that learners who are experiencing barriers to learning in public mainstream schools are supported. From experience in dealing with this particular school on a regular basis it became evident that the learners found it difficult to cope in the classroom, and the Grade R practitioners also often voiced frustration as they struggle to support them.

## **1.3 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

Early identification of gaps in the learning of young learners is therefore crucial, as:

Early Childhood Development can be described as an umbrella term that applies to the processes by which children from birth to at least nine years grow and thrive, physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually morally and socially (EWP 5).



Underachievement by Grade R learners is a serious problem in many of the schools for which the WCED conducted assessments on Grade R learners in 2011 and 2012. The main purpose of these was to identify gaps in the learning and development in learners early and inform the school and education system of the support they would need as they progressed through the grades. Practitioners would also know in advance which learners were in need of support and be able to plan for this. The results have shown that the majority of learners in the Metro South Education District presented with wide developmental gaps and were not ready for formal schooling.

The researcher assumed that the Grade R practitioners did not have the necessary skills to support these learners, most of whom had learning difficulties and were therefore not achieving the required academic outcomes. They entered Grade 1 underprepared with severe barriers to learning and development, and because they lacked the basic requirements expected in the first grade many failed. Therefore, it was considered important to investigate the needs and challenges of underachieving Grade R learners with particular reference to a primary school in Mitchell's Plain.

#### **1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The specific research question formulated to address the research problem is:

- What are the needs and challenges of underachieving Grade R learners in a Mitchell's Plain primary school?

The following sub-questions are posed to explore the study further:

1. What are the factors responsible for these Grade R learners underachieving?
2. What strategies do Grade R practitioners currently employ to support these learners?
3. What possible strategies can be recommended as support for the underachieving Grade R learners?

#### **1.5 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

The aim of this study is to investigate the needs and challenges of underachieving Grade R learners in a Mitchell's Plain primary school. Flowing from this, the study will pursue the following research objectives:

1. To find out the factors that are responsible for the Grade R learners underachieving.
2. To find out what strategies the Grade R practitioners currently employ to assist these learners
3. To explore possible strategies that could be used as support to these learners.

## **1.6 LITERATURE REVIEW**

According to McMillan and Schumacher (2010, p.73), there are two major reasons a review of literature serves as an important purpose in research. Firstly, it establishes links between existing knowledge and the research problem being investigated, which enhances significance; secondly, it provides useful information about methodology that can be incorporated into a new study.

The literature consulted varied in topic and approach. For instance, Brownell, Adams, Sindelar and Waldron (2006, p.169) state that “In special education, professional collaboration is viewed as a powerful tool for helping teachers serve students with disabilities”, whilst for Ertesvag (2011, p.1) “A growing body of research suggest that participation in more collaborative professional communities affect teaching practice and improves students learning”. The literature review aims to look at an intervention programme for reception learners who experience barriers to learning and development. It will also discuss collaboration between professionals and parents to improve education as well as ten steps to collaborative teaching between special and general educators.

An abundance of research has already looked at the causes of barriers to learning and development. For example, Rossi and Stuart (2007, p.139) found insufficient attention had been given to researching intervention programmes that support learners who experience barriers to learning and development and therefore looked at the evaluation of an intervention programme that was designed to improve the abilities in learners who had not yet mastered the learning outcomes in specific areas. Similarly, Ertesvag (2011) presented results from a study that aimed to explore the improvement in teachers’ collaboration as well as implications for professional development. One of the key intervention strategies was structured and collaborative interaction. A study by Brownell et al., (2006, p.169) examined how teachers who readily adapted and

adopted strategies acquired in collaboration differed from those who did not and their findings revealed differences in curriculum knowledge, pedagogy, student management, student-centred instruction and differences in ability to reflect on and adapt instruction. This had implications for improving professional collaboration in schools. Mattison (2008) gives a ten-step guide to collaborative teaching between special and general educators, explaining how strong and mutually beneficial relationships can be built between special and general education teachers using a collaborative teaching approach. Although each of these articles has a topic of its own, they all aim at improving education for the benefit of the learner.

Rossi and Stuart (2007) reported on the evaluation of an intervention programme for reception learners who were experiencing barriers to learning and development, points out that many were disadvantaged when they entered school, because they lacked the skills, values and attitudes expected of them in the first grade. An intervention programme was designed to improve their ability levels in the areas of language and/or fine-motor coordination. The study was conducted in three phases: assessment, pre- and post-test and evaluation of the programme, with purposive sampling used to identify learners who were at risk. Those aged five and six at different pre-schools were assessed as the sample and different standardised measuring instruments were administered. The intervention programme included vocabulary and language, eye and hand coordination, visual and auditory perceptual training, numerical and alphabetical stimulation, and reasoning skills, consisting of 20 sessions of an hour each completed in a school term. The results showed that the programme was effective in improving the eye-hand coordination of the learners who experienced barriers to learning and development and demonstrated the effectiveness of an intervention programme in improving the visual-motor coordination skills and intellectual maturity in a group of reception learners who experienced barriers to learning and development. According to Grove (1984, as cited in Rossi & Stuart, 2007, p.148) visual-motor coordination is important in the achievement of the learning outcomes and assessment standards for Grade O. The study also pointed out that remediation within a group was successful.

Early intervention programmes are considered “more effective in helping a child who experiences barriers to learning and development rather than later remedial assistance” (Guralnick, 1998 as cited in Rossi & Stuart 2007, p.148) and the valuable

role of parents in the development of their children was also noted. Pelletier and Brent (2002, as cited in Rossi & Stuart, 2007) added that learning is a developmental task of adaptation for both the child and the parent. The study also found that more boys benefitted from the intervention programme than did girls, and if this programme of intervention decreased the impact of barriers to learning and development in boys it could be regarded as a useful and timeous tool in preventing male learners from being at risk of receiving poor education (Guralnick, 1998 as cited in Rossi & Stuart 2007, p.149). The results were negative on the gross-motor part because the intervention programme did not address it.

Ertesvag (2011, p.1), noting that many researchers recommend participation in more collaborative professional communities to affect teaching practice and improve student learning, conducted a study on improvement in teacher collaboration. They examined two school improvement projects from 2006 to 2009, to determine implications for professional development with a sample of 28 schools. A web-based questionnaire was administered to 243 teachers at 10 schools attending a project on creating a handbook for classroom management, and 657 teachers in 18 schools attending a respect programme. Different collaborative activities were measured, for example, teachers' self-reported collaboration, the relationship between increased collaboration and schools' innovative climate, and teachers' perception of work strain due to pupil misbehaviour. It was found that teachers in general improved in collaboration throughout the intervention period. Reflections in pairs and/or among all the staff and activities associated with collaboration were focus areas for both interventions. The study also found that the learning environment directly affected the level of collaboration, indicating that teachers who scored the learning environment of their classroom positively reported more collaboration than their colleagues with disturbing learning environments. It was also interesting to note that there was an indirect effect of gender through the learning environment of collaboration, indicating that teachers experienced it equally positive, but women reported more collaboration than men. According to the author, a possible reason for this could have been that it was easier for women to admit they had problems in the classroom.

However, the findings of Ertesvag (2011) were based only on the teachers' reports of collaboration in different areas related to teaching and did not investigate the quality of the collaboration. This was also evident in Brownell et al., (2006, p.170), who

stated that they knew little about how individual teachers responded to collaboration and that schools varied in levels of collaboration, Those failing to implement interventions were characterised by an individual learning perspective, unlike those succeeding in implementing school-wide interventions. They concluded that mainstream educators would improve practice if they had opportunities to participate in collaborative professional development,

Ertesvag (2011, p.9) states that although teachers in general reported an increase in collaboration, the findings of that and previous studies suggest that to implement school-wide initiatives is challenging. To implement collective efforts and develop a collaborative culture that aims at supporting the individual teachers' development is a challenge to teachers and schools, indicating that strong leadership, both from the principal and the organization, are needed in order to promote continuous collaborative intervention.

Brownell et al., (2006) report on a study conducted on how teachers who readily adapt and adopt strategies acquired in collaboration differed from those who do not. The study was conducted over three years with two primary schools in which the principal was recommended as being capable. One school had a student population of 570 and the other 382. Eight teachers were purposively selected because they varied in their ability to adopt practices, in teaching grades and in years of experience. Teachers would learn to address the needs of struggling learners through well-designed collaboration that could help with powerful strategies. Using qualitative and quantitative methods such as semi-structured interviews and classroom observations it was revealed that they differed in knowledge of curriculum, pedagogy, student management, student-centred instruction and ability to reflect carefully on students' learning.

It was found that teachers who readily had a strong knowledge base on which to build, and who had the ability to identify the needs of individual students while responding to the whole class, seemed to understand strategies for their students and could adopt them. In contrast, teachers who could not make the needs of the students a priority, or who lacked prior knowledge, struggled to use and adapt a strategy, sometimes implementing the strategy routinely or even abandoning it. Through this mixed method data analysis it was proved how knowledge, skills, beliefs, and reflective

ability to work together influence a teacher's benefits from collaborative professional development.

A ten-step plan to collaborative teaching between special educators and general educators is outlined by Mattison (2008), showing how to transform the learning environment while working together. She states that collaborative teaching is the future and that in little time the 'know-how' can be developed to fully enjoy being a team. Meanwhile, Rossi and Stuart (2007), in their evaluation of an intervention programme for reception learners who experience barriers to learning and development, refer to the valuable role parents play in the development of their child.

## **1.7 DELIMITATION OF THE STUDY**

This study focused on investigating the needs and challenges of underachieving Grade R learners, found in most schools throughout the WCED, but to include all of them in this investigation was not possible. For this reason, one primary school in MSED was selected. Although the study was undertaken in MSED it should be of significance to other primary schools throughout the WCED.

## **1.8 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

A theoretical framework provides an orientation to the study and positions the research in a particular discipline (Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit, 2004), with theory defined as a set of ideas, assumptions and concepts ordered in such a way that it tells about the world, ourselves or an aspect of reality (Landsberg, 2005, p.9). Theory should be present in all qualitative studies because no single study can be designed without some questions being asked.

This study took the ecological perspective of Bronfenbrenner because it explains the direct and indirect influences on a child's life by referring to the various levels of environment or contexts that can influence a person's development. The ecological perspective demonstrates how the micro system is imbedded in the meso system (Landsberg, 2005, pp.10-11) and explains the difference in an individual's knowledge, skills and abilities, and the role of a support system in guiding and structuring the individual. It emphasizes the interaction between the individual's

development and the systems within the general social context. A learner cannot exist in isolation from surrounding systems, irrespective of whether they are teachers, the school, curriculum or parents. What happens in one system affects and is affected by other systems.

The challenge that the education system faces is therefore to:

...understand the complexity of the influences, interactions and interrelationships between the individual learner and the multiple other systems that are connected to the learner from an ecological systems theory or systems change perspective. (Swart & Pettipher, 2005, p. 9)

In the context of this study, the Grade R learners were considered as part of their own social context with intersecting systems that could be responsible for them experiencing and/or developing barriers to learning and development. Similarly, practitioners are also located in their own social context, on which the particular school, classroom, support systems can have an impact and therefore needs to be explored.

Early childhood education, underachievement, Grade R, Grade R learner, support, barriers to learning, early childhood development, practitioner, parent involvement, extrinsic barriers and intrinsic barriers were considered significant factors in explaining the challenges and needs of Grade R learners.

## **1.9 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This section describes the various aspects of the research methodology adopted for the study.

### **1.9.1 Research paradigm**

The term 'paradigm' is often used to describe approaches to educational issues. The proposed study will be conducted within an interpretive paradigm. Beginning with the individual who sets out to understand interpretations of the world in which he or she is embedded (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2005), it is therefore concerned with understanding the world as it is from subjective experiences of individuals. Maree and Van Der Westhuizen (2009) assert that it is a view of social science and a lens through which to examine the practice of research. It was considered relevant to this

study since it can be used to investigate the perceptions of individuals around Grade R learners underachieving, by using interviews, observations and document analysis as data collection methods. The researcher was aware that it would be the individual's own interpretations and would therefore accept each individual's perceptions as valid.

### **1.9.2 Research design**

A research design, according to McMillan and Schumacher (2010, p.31):

...describes the procedures for conducting the study, including when, from whom and under what conditions the data will be obtained. The purpose [being] to specify a plan for generating empirical evidence that will be used to answer the research questions. A design should therefore be selected that will result in drawing the most valid, credible conclusions from the answers in the research questions. The research design also determines how the data should be analyzed.

They also emphasized the importance of matching the question to an appropriate design.

A basic interpretative qualitative approach was followed to investigate the perceptions of practitioners on the underachieving Grade R learners. There are various interactive qualitative designs of which phenomenology was chosen because the researcher wished to gain insight into the world of the participants and to describe their perceptions and reactions. McMillan and Schumacher (2010, p.24) state that phenomenology aims at transforming lived experience into a description of essence. It is used to study the experience from the participants' points of view and allows for reflection and analysis. The phenomenological design was therefore appropriate, because it would investigate participants' perceptions of reality as they construct it.

### **1.9.3 Site**

The study took place in a primary school in the Western Cape, situated in an impoverished area that is part of Mitchell's Plain. It was state-subsidized with high numbers of academic underachieving learners and high rates of learner failure, particularly in the Foundation Phase. The particular school was selected because it



was accessible and convenient to visit frequently. The researcher had also been working in this area for the previous 12 years and was therefore familiar with it, making communication with the participants relatively straightforward.

#### **1.9.4 Sampling**

McMillan and Schumacher (2010, p.38) state that qualitative sampling can range from one to 40 or more participants. Purposeful sampling involves “researchers intentionally select[ing] individuals and sites to learn and understand the central phenomenon” (Creswell 2012, p.206), whilst for Silverman (2000, p.104) it is a matter of selecting respondents who represent the features of interest to the researcher’s particular study. The researcher decided to make use of purposeful sampling by selecting the Grade R practitioners because their contributions would be relevant to the phenomenon under study and the most likely to provide fruitful data to answer the evolving research question. A total of 20 underachieving Grade R learners formed a secondary part of the study for the purpose of enhancing the findings. The researcher only observed them and scrutinised their documents in an attempt to strengthen the findings.

### **1.10 DATA COLLECTION METHODS**

Interviews, observations and document analysis were used to collect data. Following a phenomenological perspective the researcher aimed to understand the participants’ viewpoints.

#### **1.10.1 Interviews**

Interviews are human interactions, and the interviewer directly influences the quality and quantity of the data gathered (Drew, Hardman & Hosp, 2008, p.194). They further state that interviews provide a method for collecting data embedded in the interpretations, perceptions, and experience of respondents. Basit (2010, p.100), asserts that of many types of interviews the three main ones used by individual small-scale researchers are structured, semi-structured and unstructured.

Denzin and Lincoln (2000, p.107) state that semi-structured interviews provide the researcher with the opportunity to ask individually tailored questions and do not limit the field of enquiry. The researcher therefore chose semi-structured interviews because they would allow for flexibility in the type of questions. The researcher ensured that all questions related to the research questions. An interview schedule was used for one-on-one interviews with the two Grade R practitioners, each interview lasting approximately one hour after tuition time, as the researcher does not wish to disrupt teaching activities. With the consent of the interviewees, a *Dictaphone* was used to allow for verbatim accounts to be written.

### **1.10.2 Observations**

Observations are a way for the researcher to see and hear what is occurring naturally in the research site (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p.350), and by doing so over many hours or days, the researcher hopes to obtain a rich understanding of the phenomenon being studied. The researcher was able to carry out observational methods of data collection by observing the underachieving Grade R learners and practitioners in their natural learning environment. An observation schedule was used to observe the learning environment, resources, daily timetable, teaching methods, academic performances, planning, language and literacy, Mathematics lessons, assessment and workbooks of the underachieving Grade R learners. This allowed the researcher to observe how these learners interacted with their peers and responded to activities, and how practitioners supported them. Extensive notes were taken.

### **1.10.3 Documents**

Relevant documents, such as learner profiles, written work, assessments and practitioners planning will be scrutinised to give the researcher an idea of the academic needs and challenges faced by the underachieving Grade R learner.

## **1.11 VALIDITY AND TRUSTWORTHINESS**

Various measures are taken to ensure how sound the research is, as detailed in this section.

### **1.11.1 Validity**

McMillan and Schumacher (2010, p.330) state that validity in qualitative research is concerned with the degree of congruence between explanations of the phenomena and the realities of the world. Castle (2010, p.78) asserts that it is concerned with whether the methodology, methods and techniques are appropriate to what the researcher wishes to find out. The participants and the researcher must have a mutual understanding of the issue at hand and the questions being asked, for the data to be valid. The researcher therefore ensured that the questions used in the interview were clear to the participants.

Wierma and Jurs (2005) emphasise that reliability and validity establish the credibility of the research. Reliability therefore focuses on how replicable, valid, accurate and generalizable are the findings. Basit (2010, p.135) argues that researchers need to ensure validity in observation by not reporting their findings out of context.

### **1.11.2 Trustworthiness**

The researcher strove to adhere to the principles of trustworthiness throughout the research. Trustworthiness of the data addressed issues of credibility, dependability and authenticity.

#### **i) Credibility**

This study involved the following ‘credibility’ strategies:

- Prolonged and persistent fieldwork, which allowed interim data analysis and corroboration to ensure a match between the findings and the participants’ reality.
- Mechanically recorded data, whereby the researcher made use of a Dictaphone after informed consent.
- Participant review, whereby the researcher asked the participants to review the data obtained from them to ensure accuracy. The participants were allowed to modify the information needed for accuracy.

McMillan and Schumacher (2010, p.332) describe reflexivity as a rigorous self-scrutiny by the researcher throughout the study. This process is crucial for establishing credibility.

### **ii) Dependability**

According to Creswell (2003, p.220), ‘dependability’ of data is the extent to which the same findings could be repeated if similar research instruments were simulated with similar respondents under similar conditions. Interviews, observations and document analysis were used to understand the needs and challenges of underachieving Grade R learners in a Mitchell’s Plain primary school.

### **iii) Authenticity**

In qualitative research, ‘authenticity’ refers to the ability of the researcher to report a situation through the eyes of the participants (Cohen et al., 2002, p.124), establishing the degree to which different points of views are fairly and adequately represented (Denzin & Lincoln 2005, p.23). According to McMillan and Schumacher (2010, p.335), authenticity is the fruitful reconstruction of participants’ perceptions. The researcher asked the participants to validate the identified themes for authenticity, and to ensure that their perceptions would be understood correctly, accurately captured and reported.

## **1.12 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Simons (1995, p.436, as cited in Basit, 2010), define ethics as the “search for rules of conduct that enable us to operate defensibly in the political contexts in which we have to conduct educational research”. Because humans were involved, ethical standards and the ethical code of qualitative research had to be adhered to. Creswell (2003) states that the researcher has an obligation to respect the rights, needs, desires and values of participants. Participants were informed that they were under no obligation to take part in the research. Although the researcher had the consent of the WCED, they were free to withdraw at any time if they so wished. They were informed in

writing that the data collected would remain anonymous, that they would not be identified and their responses treated confidentially.

### **1.13 DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS IN THE STUDY**

This section clarifies the terms and concepts central to understanding the objectives and purpose of the study.

**Grade R** is currently part of the four years in Foundation Phase; however it is not yet compulsory by law for a child to attend it. Many pre-primary, primary schools and ECD sites do accommodate Grade R and the learners have an advantage above those who did not attend it before embarking on formal education in the Foundation Phase.

**The Grade R learner** can be defined as a five- or six-year-old child before going to Grade 1. This learner is also referred to as the Reception Year learner. These early years are crucial for the development of the learners (DoE, 2008, p.15).

Needs relates to necessities or longings. Needs are requirements because they are essential or very important rather than just a desire (South African Concise Oxford Dictionary, 2009, p.778).

Challenges are defined as suffering from an impairment or disability (South African Concise Oxford Dictionary, 2009, p.189).

**Needs and challenges** exist for most learners coming into Grade R and Grade 1, as it is a new experience. They will have had different educational experience up to that point, and acquired different skills. Glasser (1986) states that children are doing the best they can at any given moment to satisfy one or more of their basic needs, arguing that it should be recognized that they feel ineffective in satisfying these needs, so people should feel sorry for rather than angry at them. Brewer (2007, p.45) reports on Abraham Maslow, a theorist in the 1900s, for whom learning is very difficult or not happening at all if the basic needs of learners are not met. The teacher needs to identify each learner's needs through formal and informal assessment, and is expected to accommodate all learners in programmes of learning and assessment (Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement, 2011, p.69). One of the seven trends in early

childhood development stated in Education White Paper 5 refers to the growing appreciation those children's needs and indivisible rights span the areas of health, nutrition, safe environment, and psychosocial and cognitive development.

**Underachievement** is regarded by Gillies (2008) as widespread in modern educational discourse, invoked frequently in relation to a perceived failure to reach potential. Various pieces of research show a wide variety of reasons learners underachieve, but little consensus on how to define underachieving learners. Children from families living in poverty or in households in which levels of parent education is low, typically enter school with lower levels of foundational skills (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009, p.2).

**Practitioners** take care of children from birth to five years in an organized set-up. They play an important role in the child's learning, growth and development, and the experience they give to children can have lasting effects (National Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement, 2011). In this study the two Grade R educators are referred to as practitioners.

**Early Childhood Development** is defined by White Paper 5 (2001) as an umbrella term that applies to the processes by which children from birth to nine years old grow and thrive, physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, morally and socially.

**Parent involvement** has been seen as general parent involvement, while others associate it with parents serving on school governing bodies (SGBs) or councils. Of various definitions, but they generally overlap as "the willing and active participation of parents in a wide range of school and home-based activities" (Van Wyk & Lemmer, 2009, pp.13-14).

**Barriers to learning** are acknowledged by EWP 6 (DoE, 2001, p.7) as arising from a range of factors from within the learner (internal) as well as those located outside the learner (external). Learners most vulnerable were previously referred to as "learners

with special educational needs”, or having ‘disabilities’ and ‘impairments’ (DoE, 2001, p.18). In this study barrier to learning refers to those obstacles or circumstances that prevents the Grade R learners from academically achieving.

**Support** is defined by the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2001, p.71) as everything that enables a learner to learn. The DoE (2005, p.22) defines ‘support’ as all activities which enhance the capacity of a school to cater for diversity and ensure effective learning and teaching for all their learners. Learner support is any form of help, assistance or guidance given to learners who experience barriers to learning that enable them to overcome barriers (DoE, 2001, p. 15).

#### **1.14 OUTLINE OF THE STUDY**

The study is outlined as follows.

Chapter One has introduced the research topic, problem statement and aims of the study.

Chapter Two describes the theoretical framework underpinning the study and presents a literature review.

Chapter Three explains the research design, methodology and research methods used in this research.

Chapter Four presents the data analysis and results supporting and answering the research question.

Chapter Five draws conclusions, makes recommendations and acknowledges limitations of the study.

#### **1.15 CONCLUDING REMARKS**

This chapter has provided an introduction to the research study. The paradigm, design and methods applied to it were outlined. A brief description was given of the ethical guidelines.

The theoretical framework underpinning the study will be discussed in the next chapter.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **2.1 INTRODUCTION**

The foregoing chapter served to orientate the reader to the problem and state the aim of this study. The chronological layout of the chapters was intended to give an overview of the research as a whole. It is now necessary to provide a theoretical framework and literature review on underachieving learners, Early Childhood Education, different policies impacting on Grade R as well as barriers to education, which serve as a basis for the study. Central to the discussion will be a review of other psychologists' developmental theories, as it will increase understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

'Theory' is described as a framework that orders and makes connections between currently known observations and information, offering a framework for understanding and interpreting experiences and suggesting particular courses for action (Donald et al., 2002 p. 387-389). According to Landsberg, Kruger and Nel (2005), theory can be defined as a set of ideas, assumptions and concepts, ordered in such a way that they say something about the world, people or an aspect of reality. Woollard (2010, as cited in Gray & MacBlain, 2012), define a theory as an unproven conjecture or hypothesis that gives a tentative insight into a complex situation through to a well-established explanation of that complex situation.

Unable to capture the full complexity of life, theory does however offer a framework for understanding and interpreting experiences and suggesting particular courses of action:

Theory should be present in all qualitative studies, because no study can be designed without some questions being asked. It is therefore necessary to develop a theoretical framework in which the researcher can locate his/her research, test existing theory and apply the theory in his/her own research strategy (Maree & Van Der Westhuizen 2009, p.17).

Donald et al., (2002), state that theory is not fixed, but constantly developing as people actively engage with them.



Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of human development, proposes that to understand individuals one must consider all aspects of their experiences and the differential influences of these upon them (Beckley, 2012). For the purpose of this study it was considered beneficial to use the ecological systems theory of Bronfenbrenner in understanding the phenomenon under investigation. This particular theory is relevant to the research study as it makes a valuable contribution to understanding the interconnectedness of the individual learners' development and the systems within the general context.

## **2.2 BRONFENBRENNER'S ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS THEORY**

An American psychologist, Urie Bronfenbrenner placed significant emphasis upon the wider environment when attempting to explore child development, and at the same time identified a number of layers that encompass children as they develop (Gray & MacBlain, 2012). He argued that human development unfolds in 'nested systems' which result in change, growth and development, namely physical, biological, psychological, social and cultural. The theory further requires that in order to fully explore child development the environmental influences upon the child need to be considered.

The ecological perspective of Bronfenbrenner explains the direct and indirect influences on a child's life by referring to the various levels of environment or contexts that can have an influence on personal development. This theory is relevant to the study because it demonstrates how the micro system is imbedded in the mesosystem (Landsberg, 2005, pp.10-11) and emphasizes the interaction between the individual's development and the systems within the general social context. This model of the ecology of human development acknowledges that a learner cannot exist in isolation from surrounding systems, irrespective of whether the system is a teacher, school, parent or curriculum. What happens in one system effects and is effected by other systems so it is crucial that all systems work well together for all learners, including those experiencing barriers to learning and development.

The Grade R learners face challenges at many levels that impact on their development and learning, resulting in them academically underachieving. The researcher agrees

with Education White Paper 5, that each child has the right to develop his or her full cognitive, emotional, social and physical potential.

The ecological component in Bronfenbrenner's model suggests that a person's development is influenced by a complex set of systems in the environment, including family, peers, social institutions, such as schools, churches, communities and cultures (Morris, 2006, as cited in Eggen & Kauchak, 2013, p.67). Bronfenbrenner places the individual in the centre of his model, and the *bio* in the title refers to the genetic influences, such as health, physical build and temperament.

The different systems in Bronfenbrenner's model will be discussed in the next section.

### **2.2.1 Micro- system**

“The microsystem encompasses the environments of parents, family, peers, child care, schools, neighborhood, religious groups, parks, and so forth” (Morrison, 2012, p.143), involving roles, relationships and patterns of daily activities that shape many aspects of cognitive, social, emotional, moral and spiritual development. In this study the school, home, practitioners, parents and members of the community are the most immediate people who should ensure that the learner reaches his or her full potential. The school as the microsystem is influenced by the contextual factors encapsulated within the local community structures, environment and organizations, as well as family and peer groups. The neighbourhood, for example, can be dangerous and unsafe, whilst the school might be caring and supportive.

The Grade R learner is not viewed as a passive recipient of experience in these settings, but as someone who is helping to shape the setting:

The quality of the microsystem depends on the sustainability and consistency with which it can provide a positive and congenial environment for children to learn and experience new challenges that will enhance development (Landsberg, 2005, p.80).

### **2.2.2 Mesosystem**

The mesosystem is the next layer on the outside of the microsystems that influence the relationship between an individual's home and school. These groups interact with one another, modifying each of the systems. The Grade R learner relates experiences gained in school to those gained in their family, and may "therefore draw comparisons between teachers and their parents, their new school friends and friends in the neighborhood, and between brothers and sisters and cousins" (Gray & MacBlain, (2012, p.100). Uninvolved parents in school activities may have an influence on the learners' progress, resulting in them experiencing academic challenges. However, if the school promotes parental involvement, these two systems can work together to boost the learners' self-esteem and alleviate the challenges experienced by these learners (Eggen & Kauchak, 2013).

### **2.2.3 Exosystem**

Outside the mesosystem lies the exosystem, "which includes societal influences, such as parents' jobs, school systems and workplace conditions like health care that influence both the micro and mesosystem" (Kauchak & Eggen, 2013, p.68). For example, when the SGB enacts a policy that ends social promotion in favour of grade failure it can and will influence children's future development. Morris (2012) state that research has proved children who are retained will later suffer academically and developmentally. Lack of physical resources, parents' place of employment (increased work time), decrease in results and lack of parent involvement, have a negative effect on the development of the child. According to Landsberg, (2005), if a learner is chronically ill and is absent due to poor health services it will influence the relationships with parents, teachers, peers and schoolwork.

The South African education system, on a national level, is responsible for policy development and implementation. Policies are developed that reflects the context of the country, for example Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), EWP 5, and EWP 6. The implementation and support of these policies on the other hand takes place at provincial and district level. Although the Grade R learners are not actively involved as a participant in these policies they can be directly influenced by what happens in these settings.

#### **2.2.4 Macrosystem**

The macrosystem consists of the child's cultural and societal values, and legal structures in which he or she develops. These influence all the other systems, and include attitudes, beliefs, laws, customs and resources of a particular culture. Some cultures focus on the individual and emphasize autonomy, whereas others more strongly focus on social influences and conformity (Eggen & Kauchak, 2013). According to Morris (2012), contemporary societal and media violence may influence children's development, resulting in many becoming violent or fearful and threatened. At the macrosystem level, in Mitchell's Plain are many of the Grade R learners exposed to conditions of violence and poverty on a daily basis. It is difficult for them to thrive in such devastating circumstances.

In conclusion, Bronfenbrenner's ecological approach to childhood development emphasizes that situations and people in the environment impact on their development. The model makes it clear that teachers need to be aware that all of these systems have an influence on the child's development and that they must draw on resources for support. Whether negative or positive, they all directly or indirectly influence the development of the child and can therefore not be viewed in isolation. This ecosystemic perspective provides a holistic approach to the world in which the child develops, and as Landsberg (2005) states, for successful early childhood intervention a systemic approach towards addressing not only issues relating to the child but also issues that facilitate ecological transformation should be included. Focus therefore needs to be placed on the child and his or her needs, as well as the environment, for optimal childhood development. It is crucial that all systems work together to ensure that the Grade R learner is effectively supported and developed.

### **2.3 THEORIES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT**

Keeping in mind that different systems influence young children's learning it is beneficial to review other developmental theories that examine growth, behaviour and the process of learning in young children: "A theory refers to a systematic statement of principles and beliefs created to explain a phenomenon or group of facts that have been repeatedly tested or are widely accepted" (Jackman, 2012, p.4). According to Gray and MacBlain (2012, p.105), "Theorists are an integral part of what they write

about and their theories are influenced and formed by how they see the world and by their own unique personal journey through life”.

Various cognitive psychologists have advanced theories on how learning occurs. For instance, Albert Bandura introduced the social learning theory, which outlines that children learn how to behave by observing and imitating the behaviour of others (Bandura, 1996, as cited in Beckley, 2012, p. 225; Gray & MacBlain, 2012). Motivation plays a significant role in the link between children observing behaviour and subsequent changes in their own, emphasizing imitation and identification as providing for accelerated social learning. They imitate the behaviour of others with the first, whilst with the second new learning is assimilated into existing concepts already been internalized. Children act upon new situations in a way they think that the adults on whom they have modelled their behaviour would, but Bandura recognizes that for positive, meaningful learning to take place, the behaviours of those adults being imitated by children need to be appropriate. He further suggests that children not only observe physical behaviours but also verbal behaviours of others, which includes expectations others make of them (Linden, 2005, as cited in Gray & MacBlain, 2012). Children observe adults using verbal narratives and descriptions of events and the use of language and gesture to communicate their ideas, thoughts, instructions and questions.

Bandura (1997, as cited in Gray & MacBlain, 2012), points out a key element in his theory that is directly relevant to practitioners working with young children. These practitioners should have knowledge and understanding of self-efficacy when working in educational and care settings, which he describes as a child’s belief in his or her abilities to do well and to succeed in certain situations, and also the capacity to exercise control over their own actions to gain success. It is about the child’s thinking, acting and emotional state, which suggests that humans have an ambition to achieve. Children with poor self-efficacy may have a tendency to avoid tasks that is challenging, and they present themselves as having low self-confidence.

Jerome Bruner believes that as language develops, children remove themselves from situations by way of thinking. He proposed that they can engage with others in problem solving and critical reflection: “Early years practitioners and primary school teachers should regard this developmental process as vital importance by creating linguistic environments for their learners and also provide opportunities for them to

develop language in tandem with their thinking” (in Gray & MacBlain, 2012, p.110). Bruner suggests that the contexts and experiences practitioners create for learners to develop vocabulary and the techniques they employ when questioning and explaining are important, and they must take the time to reflect upon their own use of language. Bruner’s theory gives insight into the thinking and learning of young children and allows one to explore one’s own practice and that of others. The researcher agrees with Bruner that there are many children who struggle with aspects of language and who can only store a small number of instructions of what is being asked. Gray and MacBlain (2012) cite Bruner’s claim that many of these learners will have learning difficulties, such as dyslexia or dyspraxia, and that the early years practitioner will need to be especially vigilant. Brewer (2007) focussed on Bruner’s belief that the key to good teaching was understanding the child’s development.

In contrast with Bruner, who viewed the manner in which children are supported with learning in schools as central to the development of their thinking and learning and the of their potential, Piaget proposed that children move through a number of stages in the development of human cognition, “progressing through one stage is a prerequisite for progressing to the next” (Mitchell & Ziegler, 2007 p.16). For Beckley (2012), Piaget emphasized the importance of active learning, suggesting that children learn much more effectively when able to interact with objects around them rather than when passively listening to information about those objects. Similarly, it was recognized by the micro systems theory of Bronfenbrenner that learners are not passive recipients of experience in their settings, but active in helping to shape the setting. Piaget further believes that social interaction is of great importance for cognitive development as children not only learn how to use language to describe their own ideas, but also learn about other people’s differing perspectives (Beckley, 2012). According to Piaget, the stages of development are general patterns of thinking for children at different ages or with different amounts of experience (Eggen & Kauchak, 2013). The Grade R learner falls in the pre-operational stage of Piaget’s theory of thinking.

In contrast to Piaget, Lev Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist, proposed that cognitive development is strongly linked to input from others (Slavin, 2009, p.42), however, both believed that the acquisition of sign systems occurs in an invariant sequence of steps that is similar in all children. Vygotsky’s socio-cultural theory of development

emphasizes the role of social interaction, language and culture on the child's developing mind (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986, as cited in Eggen & Kauchak, 2013, p.45). Vygotsky believed that thinking depends on speech and on the child's socio-cultural experience, and that language in the form of private speech (talking to oneself) guides cognitive development (Woolfolk, 2007) and that it is important to consider differing cultural factors, such as religion, traditions and expectations of family members, wider societal culture and demands, in a multi-cultural society.

The theories outlined by Piaget and Vygotsky show the cognitive development of children, highlighting social interaction as a vital component within it. This emphasizes the importance of cooperating with others and the valuable role this plays in facilitating learning (Beckley, 2012). For Piaget, Bruner and Vygotsky, pioneers of constructivism, knowledge is constructed through social experiences and it is crucial that learners collaborate on an interpersonal level (Nel, Nel & Hugo, 2013, p.11).

Abraham Maslow proposed a theory that focused on the learner's needs, believing that unless the basic needs of learners are met, learning would be difficult or non-existent: "The hierarchy of needs that Maslow proposed placed shelter, food, air, water at the very bottom of basic needs. The next level was safety and security followed by love and belonging" (Brewer, 2007, p.45). Maslow further emphasized that a hungry child or one that does not feel secure will not be interested or motivated to learn, and so "underscores the importance of helping learners meet their basic needs, (e.g., offering a breakfast at school), and providing a safe (physical and psychological) learning environment" (Brewer, 2007, p.45).

To conclude, Piaget, Vygotsky and Bruner all believed that a child's cognitive development is a natural process and that young children learn through interacting with the environment and the people around them (Hughes, 2010, p.62). Bandura, meanwhile, argued that the child's environment shape their learning and behaviour.

Lastly, Maslow focused on the different needs of learners as impacting on learning.

The above theories can therefore be applied effectively to support the understanding of the research question.

## **2.4 LITERATURE REVIEW**

The purpose of this literature review is to discuss the concept of underachievement as well as the Triarchic Model of Minority Children's School Achievement, to gain a better understanding of challenges that co-exist within this problem and that contribute to learners underachieving in South African schools and abroad. The researcher is of the opinion that there are varied and diverse factors contributing to learners underachieving and for not succeeding educationally or even in life. Many of these learners are victims of adverse circumstances such as poverty, abuse, poor nutrition, deficiency in the English Language, and poor health, to name a few. The constant changing family dynamics and their negative influences add to this mixture of exhaustive factors. Additional to the discussion of underachievement will be the study of Early Childhood Education, the historical background of Early Childhood in South Africa, as well as policies impacting on Grade R. The role of Grade R practitioners and parents in the developmental process will also be discussed. Finally, barriers to learning and the ecological systems approach to care and support for teaching and learning will be discussed, briefly.

### **2.4.1 The concept of underachievement**

Underachievement has been defined as the 'predominant discourse' in education in recent times (Weiner et al., 1997, p.620, as cited in Smith, 2003, p.2), whilst Smith (2003, p.11) notes that the term is widely used by politicians, journalists and academics to describe relatively poor academic performance, from a nation to an individual. Gorard and Smith (2004, p.205) emphasise that it is used routinely to refer to nations, home nations and regions, to types and sectors of schooling, to physiological, ethnic and social groups, and to individuals. They explain that the word simply means low achievement. In school it is "seen as a failure in traditional theories of education" (Stojnov, Dzinovic & Pavlovic, 2008, p.43), whilst another common definition "is that of school performance, usually measured by grades that are substantially below what would be predicted on the basis of the students ability, typically measured by intelligence or standardized academic tests" (McCall 1992, p.54, as cited in Smith, 2003, p.11). For Thorndike (1963, p.3), as cited in Smith (2003, p.11) "the problem of underachievement is one of understanding our failures in



predicting achievement and of identifying more crucial or additional factors which will predict achievement more accurately". Conceptually, underachievement represents a discrepancy between actual and expected performance (McCall et al., 1992, p.2), for example the earning of a below average grade point by a student who at the same time demonstrates average ability. Together with other researchers (Carr et al., 1991; Cattell, 1968; McCall, 1992), he recognizes that other characteristics of the individual need to be taken into account in order to come up with a modified method for predicting achievement. He promoted the use of stable relatively unmodifiable factors such as sex, family background, parental education and socio-economic status. Thorndike (1963, as cited in Smith, 2003) is of the opinion that by combining these factors with ability and achievement, scores would lead to a refined definition of underachievement, understood as achievement falling below what would be forecast from a most informed and accurate prediction, based on a team predictor of variables.

Stojnov, Dzinovic and Pavlovic (2008, p.43) based their study of school underachievement on Michel Foucault's (1975) approach to power and George Kelly's (1955) principle of elaborative choice. According to the study it is believed that school underachievement represents a good example of the disciplinary mechanisms of behaviour normalization. By this they mean that school underachievement diverges from the expected norm, and the study also pointed out that the curriculum establishes norms of achievement and compulsory activities for pupils. Moreover, failure to meet the demands of the curriculum represents a deviation from legal, psychological, psychiatric, and economic standards. Montgomery (2005, p.5) added that relevance in the curriculum is often recommended, however it was noted in the Scottish Education Department survey report (SED, 1978) and Lower Attaining Pupils Project (HMI, 1986) that pupils' failure to see the relevance of the curriculum offered was a significant contributory factor in the development of their under-functioning and learning difficulties. He emphasizes the importance for teachers to consider relevance and share it with the learners. Montgomery (2005, p.6) is of the opinion that the most common and the most detrimental barriers to educational progress, resulting in under-functioning, is dyslexia, together with other learning disabilities. Pupils challenged with these difficulties, however able, cannot reveal their abilities when asked to write down their

ideas, unless they are shown how to overcome them. Stojnov, Dzinovic and Pavlovic (2008) refer to school underachievers as “outlaws”, and

School underachievement becomes an indicator of a ‘deeper’ pathological process and a symptom of various potential mental disorders. It is emotional, social, and motivational deficiencies that obstruct efficient school achievement (p.47).

They recommend that it be treated by psychological means appropriate to its psychological nature.

According to West and Pennell (2003, p.5), the concept of underachievement may be used as a characteristic of groups and not just of individuals. They believe that pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds or certain ethnic groups may be said to underachieve regardless of their IQ and question whether teachers have the ability to discriminate between pupils in terms of whether their achievement is in line with their ability:

Sometimes the concern is about the achievement of particular social classes, sometimes about boys, sometimes from those from particular ethnic groups, sometimes from those who are from disadvantaged backgrounds and so on” (p.3).

“To overcome economic and social disadvantage and to make equality of opportunity a reality, we must strive to eliminate and never excuse underachievement in the most deprived parts of our country” (DfEE, 1997, p.3 as cited in Smith, 2003, p.2).

Montgomery (2005) states that the constant lowering of attainment in comparison with peers can lead to a lowering of their sense of self-esteem and self-worth. A result of this can lead to them seeking esteem in other ways, such as seeking attention or being disruptive, which will leave even less opportunity for learning and lower their attainment further. Learners with a high self-esteem and self-worth are usually not afraid to make mistakes while learning because failure does not result in harsh punishment but in support, encouragement to try again and, most of all, understanding. Relevance to the curriculum was also highlighted, which in a survey report of the Scottish Education Department (1978) and Lower Attaining Pupils Project (1986), as: “pupils failure to see the relevance of the curriculum on offer was a significant contributing factor in their under functioning and learning difficulties” (Montgomery, 2005, p.5). Acknowledging that conditions in which children of all

abilities grow up vary widely around the world, Montgomery gives an example of the Favella slums of Brazil, in which children have to earn money to live and teachers are obliged to use their ingenuity, such as enticing children into school with food. In South Africa, children in informal settlements are struggling with the break-up of the apartheid system of education, with large classes and teachers who are often not fully trained. Montgomery (2005, p.2) states that underachievers have:

- a dislike of school work and book learning
- a sense of inadequacy and limited ambition
- poor work habits
- unsatisfactory relationships with peers
- high incidence of emotional difficulties
- behavioural problems in school.

A considerable amount of research has already been conducted in various countries to determine the circumstances affecting underachievers. The results revealed that most had a poor socioeconomic background. Sammons et al. (1997a, as cited in West & Pennell, 2003, p.43), found that young children from low-income families, who were known to be eligible for free school meals, performed at a lower level than others and were more likely to have a poor attendance record. A study in England by West et al, (2001) found a correlation between the proportion of children in families dependent on income support or state benefits and low attainment.

The phenomenon of underachievement has also been found in countries with high living standards. In an international survey of mathematics and science performance of 14 year olds, results in England were similar to that of the United States, New Zealand and Italy. However, it lagged behind in countries such as Singapore, Japan, Belgium, the Netherlands, Hungary, Canada and Australia. A study of pre-school children, examining the association between a range of personal, family and home environment characteristics and cognitive attainment revealed that socio-economic background was highly significant.

Underachievement of boys has also been an increasing issue in the public debate (West & Pennell, 2003, p.53):

It has been argued that that there are innate, natural born differences between the sexes: boys are more likely to suffer from oxygen starvation at birth, they

have poorer verbal reasoning skills, they mature later than girls, their parents do not talk to them as much as they do their sisters and so on (Arnold 1997, Cohen 1998, as cited in Smith, 2003, p.4).

A study conducted by Sammons et al., (1999) included an investigation of the contribution to children's early development of individual and family characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, language, parental education and employment. The study included over 2,000 children entering over 100 different pre-school centres. The results showed that girls had higher cognitive attainment on entry when the impact of other factors had been taken into account. The study also suggested that differences between the attainment of girls and boys were a function of differential cognitive ability, which reveals itself early in their lives (West & Pennell, 2003, p.54).

West and Pennell (2003, p.8) point out that underachievement in schools can arise from four common factors, namely:

- individual: intelligence, attitudes, motivation, self-esteem, gender, health
- family: family/household composition, educational level of parents, socio-economic status/income levels, parental involvement
- community and societal: social class, ethnicity/race, gender, housing
- school: characteristics of pupils, school composition/peer effects, curriculum, school structures.

The study will now focus its discussion on the above mentioned contributory factors:

#### ***2.4.1.1 Factors related to the individual***

Individuals do not grow up in isolation but are part of families, communities and the broader society. Attitudes, motivation and self-esteem develop on the basis of their interaction with others, and:

If a child who has grown up in poor conditions does not succeed in rising above these circumstances, there is a danger that he or she will leave school early and become part of that vicious circle of poor and unstable employment, poverty, participation in negative social practices, crime and an inability to control his or her own life (West & Pennell, 2003, p.10).

The attitude of the individual towards education and learning, and their motivation to learn are crucial.

#### ***2.4.1.2 Family factors***

Underachievement:

might be seen as an issue that is primarily determined by the family context in which a child grows up and it might be the case that particular attitudes and values are instilled in young people as a result of this family context (West and Pennell, 2003, p.11).

These children may grow up with one or both parents, carers or in public care, or with parents who are highly educated or less well educated. Parents may even be highly educated or even less well educated, and have professional or manual occupations. Family background is therefore associated with attainment.

#### ***2.4.1.3 Community and societal factors***

West and Pennell (2003, p.11) emphasise that underachievement might be determined more broadly by the society or community in which the person grows up. Most of the residents of South Africa can be classified as of poor socio-economic status, as seen by unfulfilled lack of basic needs, such as housing, furniture, food, water and clothing.

#### ***2.4.1.4 School characteristics***

Research has shown that some schools are more effective than others as background characteristics of learners will impact on achievement (West & Pennell, 2003, p.11). If there are a large number from a disadvantage background the results will be affected negatively.

#### **2.4.2 Triarchic model of minority children's school achievement**

The triarchic model focuses on three major factors contributing to minority children's school achievement, namely, role of the school, family contribution to academic performance, and children's social identity. It is argued that the form and structure of education has the potential to elicit resistance to school from all children. The compulsory nature of education and organization of classroom activities, by which children are required to demonstrate their knowledge publicly, answer questions in class discussions, and have examples of good work displayed on walls or at awards ceremonies, places them in the undesirable position of not being the best (Bossert, 1979; D'Amato, 1993; Jackson, 1968, as cited in Okagaki, 2010, p.10).

Other research (Dumont & Wax, 1976; Jordan, 1984; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Vogt et al., 1993, as cited in Okagaki, 2010, p.11) suggests that cultural differences between home and school interfere with some children's ability to adjust to the classroom and focus on learning. Another contributory factor is the way in which teachers and students communicate with each other as teacher and student speech sometimes overlaps. Differences in rules for speaking, listening and turn-taking may make it more difficult for children from other cultures to participate. Okagaki (2010) therefore states that to understand these children's school achievement one must understand the ways in which the social organization of the classroom can help or hinder children's learning.

Some researchers contend that the difficulty children experience negotiating two distinct cultural contexts, for instance, home and school, contributes to their underachievement (Delgado-Gaitan, 1992; Tharp, 1989; Trueba, 1988). It was however found that culture provides a foundation for parents' understandings of school and contributes to their overall educational environment. Okagaki and Frensch (1998, as cited in Okagaki, 2010, p.13) reported on a study in which parents were asked how much education they would ideally like their child to obtain, how much education they expected their child to obtain, and what would be the least amount of schooling they would allow their child to attain. Asian American parents had high educational expectations with a minimum of attainment of a college graduation, whilst for European American parents the lowest expectation was high school graduation, and for Latino parents it was merely college education. This study

confirmed that parents' educational expectations for their children is at least partly associated with ethnic background

In addition to entertaining different educational expectations for their children, parents also have different expectations for their children's teachers. Okagaki and Sternberg (1993, as cited in Okagaki, 2010, p.14), examined parents' ideas about primary-grade teachers' classrooms goals among Cambodian, Filipino, Vietnamese, and Mexican parents and parents who were born in USA with European American and Mexican American backgrounds. The findings showed that the latter it important for teachers to help their students develop knowledge and problem solving skills, whilst the other parents reported that teaching children how to do their work neatly was just as important as developing their knowledge and thinking skills.

Researchers have also observed variation in parental support for children's academic achievement and perceptions of what they can do to help them. Okagaki and Frensch (1998, as cited in Okagaki, 2010, p.15) asked parents how frequently they engaged in activities to help their children with schoolwork, for example, helping study for tests and checking homework, and how often they engaged in intellectually stimulating activities that were not school-related, such as reading at home themselves and reading a non-school book with their child. The results showed that parents who were not educated in US schools do not always understand the assignments, especially when the instructions are given verbally to the child and not written down: "Moreover, unless a teacher communicates otherwise, the parents may assume that everything is going well and they may not recognize when their child needs more assistance than he or she is receiving in class" (Goldenberg, 1987, as cited in Okagaki, 2010, p.15). The study also pointed out that parental encouragement and indirect help, coupled with high expectations, contributed to success. Asian American families, for example, structure the home environment to facilitate the child's learning rather than helping with schoolwork.

Lastly, a study on adolescents in minority groups that focused on their characteristics in school achievement found that one must consider the development of ethnic identity as well as academic identity (LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993; Ogbu, 1992; as cited in Okagaki, 2010, p.16). Children need to develop a positive academic identity while holding onto positive ethnic identity. They need to view school as a domain in which they can experience success and be motivated to succeed.

In conclusion, the Triarchic Model emphasises that the school, home and personal characteristics of the student must be considered in explanations of minority children's school achievement.

The above discussions revealed that underachievement is a multifaceted concept that needs to be identified and dealt with in an eco-systemic approach. Failing to do so may result in learners feeling alienated, dropping out, suffering personal harm, engaging in challenging behaviour and/or being excluded.

## **2.5 EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION**

According to Jackman (2005, p.4):

A child's world is fresh and new and beautiful, full of wonder and excitement....If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder... [s/he] needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with the child the joy, excitement, and mystery of the world we live in.

A high standard of early childhood education is one of the most valuable gifts a child and community can receive in the journey towards becoming a confident well-educated person, and "Growing up in poverty can significantly affect young children's readiness to learn upon school entry" (Saracho & Spodek, 2013, p.11).

According to the South African DoE (2011):

Approximately 40 percent of children in South Africa live in absolute poverty and neglect. Children raised in these conditions are most at risk of health and social issues leading to poor adjustment to school, thus increasing the risk of repetition of school grades and school dropout.

The DoE intends to focus on expanding ECD provision, correcting imbalances in provision, ensuring equitable access, and improving the quality and delivery of ECD programmes (DoE, 2011).

Morrison (2012) states that early childhood education requires early childhood professionals who are up-to-date and willing to adapt in order for all learners to learn and succeed in school. He further emphasizes the need for high quality early childhood professionals who successfully teach all children, promote high professional standards, and continually expand his or her own knowledge.



International research on early cognitive development shows that by the time children enter formal schooling considerable gaps in cognitive ability already exist on the basis of socio-economic status (Burkman 2002; Feinstein 2003; Heckman 2006; as cited in Van der Berg et al., 2011).

### **2.5.1 Benefits of Early Childhood Education**

ECD lays the foundation for acquiring basic literacy and numeracy skills, and therefore helps reduce dropout and repetition rates. If well managed it generates a predisposition of the child towards learning and attending school, and as UNESCO (1996) indicates, there is improved preparation of children for primary education, especially in the development of basic skills such as reading, writing, numeracy, and language learning. ECD programmes also cater for the detection, treatment, correction, improvement and prevention of nutritional, health, physical or mental defects and the early removal of learning difficulties. Children are provided with an opportunity to develop positive attitudes, self-confidence, motivation and ability to learn, which are conducive to development, happiness and success at school. ECD education also leads to the development of capable children who will eventually contribute to a society of educated, responsible and productive citizens. A significant factor common to children who repeat classes is their initial lack of readiness for learning in reading, writing, numeracy and language acquisition as well as unpreparedness for entry into primary schools. The main purpose of linking ECD and primary education is to ensure a smooth transition for children from one level of learning to another (UNESCO, 1996).

### **2.5.2 School readiness**

School readiness is accomplished once the child as a “person-in-totality” can cope with the responsibility of formal instruction (De Witt, 2009, p.170). A Grade R classroom should therefore accommodate physical resources, learning material and learning activities that support school readiness. Practitioners expect learners in Grade R to become school ready, but the schools also need to be “child ready”. The environment, especially the classroom, needs to be stimulating and provide ample

opportunity for optimal learning and development. It is therefore crucial that schools focus on the educational needs of Grade R learners (Davin & Van Staden, 2005, p.5).

### **2.5.3 Access to Grade R**

Grade R is offered in both public schools and registered community ECD centres. In 2011, 83% of Grade One learners in South Africa attended formal Grade R classes.

## **2.6. EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTH AFRICA**

This section traces the history and current state of ECD in parts of South Africa.

### **2.6.1 Early childhood development since 1994 and beyond**

The term Early Childhood Development (ECD) has been variously defined and evaluated:

[it] conveys the importance of an holistic approach to child development and signifies an appreciation of the importance of considering a child's health, nutrition, education, psycho-social and additional environmental factors within the context of the family and community (Interim Policy for Early Childhood Development, 1996).

The care and development of young children must be the foundation of social relations and the starting point of human resource development strategies from community to national levels" (White Paper on Education and Training, 15 March 1995).

There are approximately 6.5 million children in the 0 to 6 year old age cohort. 3.8 Million (59,2%) of these children live in poverty (Department of Social Development, Department of Education & Department of Health, 2004).

Since 1994, various pieces of legislation, policies and programmes have been developed to address children's needs, as different departments attempt to fulfil them. After recognizing the need for and benefits of ECD for nation-building, reconstruction and development, the first democratically elected government of South Africa committed itself to the expansion of ECD provisioning in the White Paper on

Education and Training 1995 and 1997 White Paper for Social Welfare. The former described the process of transformation in education and training that would bring into being a system serving all South Africans, and proposed that ECD be provided in an holistic approach that promoted the child's cognitive, social, physical wellbeing (DoE, 1995, p.27-33). The DoE then released an Interim Policy for ECD in 1996 and embarked on a National ECD Pilot Project that was concluded in 1999. This informed the model of provisioning for the Reception Year in the education system and also to be concerned with the holistic development of the young child.

According to UNICEF (2005), the Department of Social Development (DoSD) addresses the provisioning for children from birth to nine, focussing on how to address needs of children according to their specific ages, as: "It is widely recognized that young children are a particularly vulnerable section of our community, and the early years are a period of great potential for human development" (p.4).

The DoE (2001) developed and implemented White Paper 5 on Early Childhood Development as a follow-up on the Education White Paper on Education and Training (1995). The focus of the policy was on birth to six years, with emphasis on education provision for Grade R: "Children raised in... poor families are most at risk for infant death, low birth weight, stunted growth, poor adjustment to school, increased repetition and high drop-out rates (EWP 5 on Early Childhood Development, 2001).

Early childhood development requires a comprehensive approach to policies and programmes for children from birth to nine years of age, with the active participation of their parents and caregivers. Its purpose is to protect the child's rights to develop his or her cognitive, emotional, social and physical potential. Consistent with White Paper 1 on Education and Training (1995) and the Interim Policy for Early Childhood Development (1996), White Paper 5 defines early childhood development as an umbrella term that applies to the processes by which children from birth to nine years grow and thrive, physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, morally and socially (Education White Paper 5 on Early Childhood Education). It further emphasizes the importance of an integrated approach to child development and signifies an appreciation of the importance of considering a child's health, nutrition, education, psycho-social and additional environment factors within the family and community (EWP 5). UNESCO (1996) states that this is the period of greatest growth and development, when the brain develops most rapidly, almost at its fullest. At this stage:

Children's experiences have far reaching and solidifying effects on the development of their brains and behavior. These experiences affect the brain, the expression of genes, bio-chemistry and psychology of the body – all which mediate our cognitive, emotional and social behavior (McCain, Mustard & Shanker, 2007, p.13).

In May 2004 a mandate was given to the Social Sector Cluster to develop an integrated plan for ECD. The National Integrated Plan was released in 2005 with a specific focus on poor and vulnerable children aged five and under. The plan envisaged creation of an environment in which all children would have access to a range of safe, accessible and high quality ECD programmes, including a developmentally appropriate curriculum, knowledgeable and well-trained programme staff and educators, and comprehensive services that support their health, nutrition and social well-being in an environment that respects and supports diversity. The key aim was to bring synergy and coordination to current government programmes undertaken by various departments in the area of ECD and give the children the best start in life by building a solid foundation of physical, emotional, psychosocial, cognitive and healthy development. According to UNICEF (2005), the World Bank had identified five approaches to developing young children:

- delivering services to children
- training caregivers and educating parents
- promoting community development
- strengthening institutional resources and capacity building
- public awareness and enhancing demand (Mary Eming, 1997)

Three government departments, namely the Department of Health, the Department of Education and the Department of Social Development are responsible for the implementation of the NIP for ECD (2005), which “suggests that coordination between and within the different tiers of Government and community organizations is one of the key factors for success in providing ECD services” (UNICEF, 2005).

### **2.6.2 Access to quality Early Childhood Development in the Western Cape**

The DoE was mandated to provide education for five to nine year olds, but the establishment and provisioning of Grade R classes for the five and six year olds in

both public ordinary schools and ECD Independent schools, formerly referred to as privately owned community crèches, is the responsibility of the Institutional Management and Governance Planning Directorate. Grade R classes are managed by a sub-directorate, with a chief education specialist, one deputy chief education specialist and one senior education specialist within the DoE. The curriculum for ECD is managed by the curriculum sub-directorate, with a chief education specialist and two deputy chief education specialists as permanent staff.

According to the South African Schools Act (SASA) Section 3(1), school education is compulsory for all learners from the day they turn seven, until the last day of the year in which the learner reaches the age of 15 or in grade nine, whichever comes first. It is a Constitutional obligation of the state and the WCED to provide basic education for all learners.

### **2.6.3 Challenges in Early Childhood Development**

The Western Cape government (2011), points out that the ECD sector is vibrant but complex, facing a number of key challenges:

- Under-provision or skewed provision in relation to need and children's situation
- variable quality of programmes, because they have not had to be accredited
- lack of inadequate practitioner/teacher training and supervision, and low morale of staff who are trained but have limited career path opportunities
- inadequate or poor infrastructure that compromises safety and learning
- lack of institutional capacity in community-based organizations for good governance and management
- inadequate departmental and institutional capacity to manage the size and scope of responsibility
- lack of finance
- lack of compliance with norms and standards and the legislative requirements of the new Children's Act (2005)
- lack of coordination and fragmentation in the sector and between spheres of government, e.g., different interpretations of the role of local government

- inadequate systems and resources to monitor a sector with a high turnover of organization
- barriers to access for children with special needs and a concomitant shortage of allied professionals who can make early identification and render specialist services.

## **2.7 POLICIES IMPACTING ON GRADE R**

A number of policies impact on Grade R, as examined in this section.

### **2.7.1 Education White Paper 5**

The main priority of White Paper 5 (2001) is the implementation of the pre-school Reception Year (Grade R) for five year olds. The constitutional obligation of the policy is to provide all learners with ten years of compulsory school education, including one of early childhood education, referred to as the Reception Year. Access to Grade R would be available at the following sites:

- Reception Year programme within a public primary school system
- Reception Year programme within community-based sites
- Independent provision of Reception Year programmes.

The policy envisaged that by 2010 all learners entering Grade 1 should have participated in an accredited Reception Year programme, but because of various challenges the strategic objectives have been shifted to 2014. The first priority would be that all public ordinary schools should provide accredited Reception Year programmes for approximately 85 percent of five year olds and the remaining ones would be accommodated within independent and selected ECD independent schools (Integrated Provincial Early Childhood Development Strategy, 2011-2016). The policy goals of early childhood development of children ages six to nine are outlined in a five year plan, Trisano: 1999-2004, as well as the annual supplementary work programme. The foci of these are to improve the quality and effectiveness of teaching and learning and the functioning of schools as they serve these children in Grades 1, 2, 3 and 4. These policies and programmes focus on improving learners' language, mathematical and life skills, knowledge, values and attitudes.

The White Paper also makes provision in the strategic plan for the development of curricular and practitioner career-pathing and development. The revised 1996 census statistics estimated that approximately 10 million children fell within the age range of birth to 9 years. The policy focussed on this group of children, reiterating that 40 percent of families lived in poverty, whereby rural African families were the worst affected, and Children raised in these poor families were most at risk of infant death, low birth weight, stunted growth, poor adjustment to school, increased year repetition and school dropout. It is therefore imperative for the DOE to put in place an action plan to address the early learning opportunities of all learners, especially those in poverty.

### **2.7.2 Education White Paper 6**

This policy was born from a need to include all learners in the education system and to remove barriers that had excluded certain learners from receiving support. Inclusive education is concerned with the well-being of all children. According to Green and Engelbrecht (2007), increased learner diversity in education places a responsibility on education systems worldwide to identify and address a wide range of barriers to learning effectively. The fundamental principle of Inclusive Education (IE) is that all children should learn together where possible, regardless of their differences (UNESCO, 1994). One of the aims of IE is to ensure that learners experiencing barriers to learning, such as poverty and inequality, can work and learn together in a safe and caring school environment that respects human rights.

Education White Paper 6, Special Needs Education (EWP 6): Building an Inclusive Education and Training System, was issued by the DoE in 2001, four years after the combined and final report of the National Commission on Special Needs in Education and Training (NCSNET) and the National Commission for Education Support Services (NCESS). It defined an inclusive education and training system as one that:

- acknowledges that all children and youths can learn and that all youths need support;
- enables education structures, systems and learning methodologies to meet the need of all learners;

- acknowledge and respects differences in learners, whether due to age, gender, ethnicity, language, class, disability, HIV or other infectious disease;
- is broader than formal schooling and acknowledges that learning also occurs at home, in the community and in formal and informal settings and structures;
- change attitudes, behaviour, teaching methods, curricula and environment to meet the needs of all learners;
- maximizes the participation of all learners in the culture and the curriculum of educational institutions and uncovers and minimizes barriers to learning.

(DoE, 2001, pp. 6-7)

Education White Paper 6 adheres to the broad definition of inclusive education, acknowledging that all learners can experience barriers to learning at some time and that support should be available to accommodate a range of diverse learning needs.

“Different learning needs may arise because of:

- Negative attitudes to and stereotyping of difference.
- An inflexible curriculum.
- Inappropriate languages or language of learning and teaching.
- Inappropriate communication.
- Inaccessible and unsafe built environments.
- Inappropriate and inadequate support services.
- Inadequate policies and legislation.
- The non-recognition and non-involvement of parents.
- Inadequately and inappropriately trained education managers and educators”

(EWP 6, 2001, p.7).

It views inclusion as recognizing and respecting learner diversity and supporting all learners, teachers and the system as a whole in order to address the full range of learner needs. The policy document focuses on teaching and learning with emphasis on the development of effective teaching strategies that will benefit learners. It also focuses on identifying and minimizing barriers in the system that prevent it from meeting the full range of learning needs and making support available in the classroom, (DoE, 2001).



### **2.7.3 Language policy**

The Language in Education Policy (1997) stated that because parents were included as stakeholders in making decisions around the progression of their children they should take part in choosing the language, and not only departmental officials and educators as before. Emanating from the SASA the Language in Education Policy (1997) was developed, according to which parents have the right to choose the language of learning and teaching (LoLT), as one of the “most common barriers associated with language and communication is that learners are often forced to communicate and learn in a language which they do not usually use at home and are not competent to learn effectively” (DoE, 2005, p.11).

### **2.7.4 Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS)**

The National Curriculum Statement Grades R – 12 (NCS) stipulates policy on curriculum and assessment in the schooling sector. To improve implementation, an amended curriculum, the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) came into effect in January 2012, for each subject (DoE, 2011, p.4). The policy is a more regulated learning programme and provides more time for literacy and numeracy, with workbooks a central feature.

The general aims of the South African Curriculum are to ensure that children acquire and apply knowledge and skills in ways that are meaningful in their own lives.

The National Curriculum Statement serves the purpose of:

- equipping learners, irrespective of their socio-economic background, race gender, physical ability or intellectual ability, with knowledge, skills and values necessary for self-fulfilment, and meaningful participation in society as citizens of a free country (DoE, 2011)

The policy further stipulates that inclusivity should become a central part of the organizational planning at each school. All teachers must therefore have a sound understanding of how to recognize and address barriers to learning, and how to plan for diversity. It points out that the key to managing inclusivity is to ensure that barriers are identified and addressed by all the relevant support structures within the school community, including teachers, district based support teams, school based

support teams, parents and special schools as resource centres. Teachers should make use of various curriculum differentiated strategies to address barriers in the classroom (DoE, 2011), and addressing the needs and challenges of Grade R learners through the curriculum is apparent.

## **2.8 GRADE R LEARNER**

As previously mentioned, the foundation phase is part of early childhood development (ECD), an umbrella term applied to the process by which children from birth to nine years grow and thrive physically, mentally, emotionally, morally and socially (DoE, 1995, p.33). Woolfolk (2007) states that according to Erikson's stages of psychosocial development, the foundation phase learner is in the fourth stage of development, which he refers to as 'industry versus inferiority'. This particular stage covers the early school years from approximately five to seven, marked by rapid cognitive development.

As children are able to process more information faster and their memory spans are increasing, "They move from pre-operational to concrete-operational thinking" (Woolfolk, 2007, p.69). During this developmental stage, they become interested in exploring and are ready to learn and express their natural curiosity and creativity through opportunities in the environment. They must therefore be given freedom to engage in fantasy and dramatic play activities (Jackman, 2005, pp.6-7), whilst Morrison (2012) states that the responsibility of children's early learning and development is a shared responsibility among children, parents, families, early childhood professionals, communities, states and the nation.

### **2.8.1 Learner needs**

As "The Ministry appreciates that a broad range of learning needs exists among the learner population at any point in time, and that where these are not met, learners may fail to learn effectively or excluded from the education system" (EWP 6, 2001, p.7), all classrooms are challenged and it is the responsibility of the class educator to ensure that all learners' needs are met within the classroom. In addition, "Children's needs are important factors that influence their learning. These derive from developmental needs such as physical activities, social and emotional well being and

opportunities for play” (Palaiologou, 2012, p.35). As the DoE (2011) acknowledge, South African schools have a wide range of learners from different backgrounds, presenting with different learning needs, such as:

- difficulty in reading and writing
- hearing, visual and coordination problems
- living in poverty
- health and emotional difficulties
- difficulty remembering what has been taught
- a need for assistive devices and adapted material, such as Braille.

It is the responsibility of each teacher to ensure that all learners’ needs are accommodated within the classroom as failing to do so will result in these learners experiencing barriers to learning.

## **2.9. EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT PRACTITIONERS**

As stated in chapter one, the term ‘practitioner’ refers to one who takes care of children from birth to five years in an organized setup. Practitioners play a very important role in the child’s learning, growth and development and the experience they give to children can have a lasting effect (CAPS, 2011). The Interim Policy for Early Childhood Development (1996) states that the term refers to all early childhood development education and training development practitioners, encompassing the whole spectrum of ECD education, trainers, facilitators, lecturers, caregivers, and developmental officers, including those qualified by their experience and who are involved provision homes, centres and schools.

The Department of Social Development (DoSD) and UNICEF state that a practitioner who meets the minimum standard must be able to:

- “demonstrate how to facilitate growth and skills development in early childhood programmes.
- set up and manage a variety of active learning activities that are appropriate to the developmental needs of the children.
- interact and communicate with young children in a way that supports all aspects of learning.

- use an inclusive anti-bias approach that respects the cultural, religious and experiential background of the children and supports children with disabilities.
- maintain a safe and healthy learning environment.
- establish a supportive and caring environment that meets children’s basic and social needs and helps them manage their own behaviour.
- establish respectful and co-operative relationships with co-workers’ families and community.
- contribute to programme planning and evaluating the assessment of children’s progress and administration of the learning programme”.

(Department of Social Development and UNICEF, 2006, p.66)

### **2.9.1 Role of Grade R practitioners in the developmental process**

Gray and MacBlain (2012) state that practitioners working with children require some knowledge of the processes involved in learning, so that they can support, develop and scaffold their development.

- Practitioners need to offer children a balanced programme of experiences – they need to be adaptable and respond to individual needs.
- The primary challenge is to provide sufficient activities to assist children with their development as learners and human beings.
- Practitioners need to make use of the child’s environment, a range of bought, found and made materials and equipment in order to provide children with sufficient concrete, “hands-on” experiences.
- Practitioners should select activities and equipment that promote the goals of non-sexism, non-racism and non-violence.
- Practitioners should assess the progress of each child through continuous observation to provide information about the child’s development in all aspects of emotional, physical, intellectual and personal growth.
- Practitioners should assess qualitatively to assist children in their development and not for the purpose of promotion. Assessment through observation should be an integral part of the programme.
- Practitioners should provide information to parents and family with regard to the development of the child.

- Practitioners should encourage consultative partnerships in the assessment process.
- Assessment should include the child, curriculum, learning environment and practitioners themselves in order to achieve optimal opportunities for children and to enhance development. (Interim Policy for Early Childhood Development, 1996)

## 2.10 LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Defined as “a place or setting where learning occurs” (Department of Basic Education, p.12), policy emphasises two key dimensions of the learning environment:

- 1) **psychosocial learning environment** which covers psychological and social factors that have consequences for satisfaction, health, wellbeing and ability to perform effectively, and this includes:
  - interpersonal cooperation;
  - classroom and school culture;
  - protection against harassment and mental harm and
  - effective communication
- 2) **physical environment** which includes factors such as classroom spaces, classroom infrastructure, arrangement of furniture, level of noise, class size, classroom displays and resources.

Edwards (2003) states that one of the ways in which children’s spirits are nurtured is through a classroom environment characterized by beauty, order and simplicity. Such an environment helps children to gain confidence and give them a sense of love and appreciation, and “...development must take place in an environment that is safe, affectionate and encouraging for children, an environment that promotes positive feelings and social skills” (Palaiologou, 2010, p.227).

The classroom environment should be warm, inviting and exiting. According to Bruce (2006, p.112, as cited in Beckley, 2012, p.182), “children use their senses to learn

about materials, and they learn from feedback from their movements in relation to them (kinaesthetic learning”. They should be involved in creating their own setting, thus developing a sense of independence, and practitioners should guard against laying out resources for them but rather encourage them to select resources as and when they need. Setting up the right environment can help to develop independence and building relationships with learners is crucial in order to learn about their interests.

Beckley (2012) also believes that children learn from the context in which they are placed, the social mores, the rules of the setting as well as how to interact successfully, therefore it is therefore crucial that the practitioner ensures that the learning environment is inclusive and supports individual learners who might need extra provision in certain areas. Beckley (2012) proposes that the learning environment should encompass the ethos of the establishment and the practitioner’s values and beliefs. Many children come from home environments that are not stimulating, offer little or no consistency in day-to-day routines, relationships or affection. It is critical for practitioners to consider all of the above factors when trying to meet the learning needs of the Grade R learner.

## **2.11 ROLE OF PARENTS**

“The primary role of parent is that of teacher” (Okagaki, 2010, p.13) and, according to NCSNET and NCESS (1997), parental involvement and family support are essential in the education of the learner. Parents should be involved in planning school policy and must facilitate learning at home. The SASA, No 84 of 1996, allocates to parents the fundamental right to participate in decision-making with regard to their children’s futures. McKenzie and Loebenstein, (2007) contend that parental involvement has a positive effect on the child’s success in school and their interactions with and support of their child can enhance the learning process. They add that parents need to assist their children in gaining access to schools. Parents of learners who experience barriers to learning should be involved in the collaborative process of support from the start, and therefore play a central role in the collaborative team approach in the school (DoE, 2001). However, according to the DoE (2005, p.12), “parents are not always

adequately informed of their children's problems or progress, and therefore are often deprived of the opportunities to participate in their children's development".

### **2.11.1 Parental recognition and involvement**

Eileen Allen and Cowdery (2009) are of the opinion that parents and teachers are partners in children's learning and bear a continuing and primary responsibility during the long years of a child's growth and development. Okagaki (2010, p.18) is of the opinion that parents' ideas about and understanding of school may help children's academic performance to greater or lesser degrees. They have less understanding of how school works and may misinterpret teacher feedback on the child's performance or not be able to provide effective support. This can be detrimental to the school performance of the younger child, so "Empowerment and development of parents of learners who experience barriers to learning therefore should receive priority attention through support for the development and strengthening of parent organizations as stipulated in the National Programme for Action for Children" (DoE, 1997). For Landsberg (2005 p.84), "When parents and practitioners work together in early childhood settings, the impact on the child's development and learning multiplies".

## **2.12 BARRIERS TO LEARNING**

According to Links (2009, p.12), "In any institution there will be a diverse group of learners who experience different barriers to learning and have diverse needs", described by the DoE (2002 p.130-131) as "...those factors that lead to the inability of the system to accommodate diversity, which leads to learning breakdown or which prevents learners from accessing educational provision...", and "difficulties that arise within the education system as a whole, the learning site and/or within the learner him/herself which prevent both the system and the learner needs from being met" (DoE, 2005, p.5).

'Barriers to learning and development' is a phrase that was tabled during the NCSNET and NCESS process to broaden the scope of learners whose special needs often arose as a result of hindrance to learning and development. It recognized that learning breakdown might occur as a result of a range of factors, such as challenges within the centre of learning; the education system as a whole; the wider society; or

within the learner, (DoE, 1997, p.5). Those most vulnerable to barriers to learning are those historically referred to as “learners with special educational needs”, formerly termed ‘disabilities’ and ‘impairments’ (DoE, 2001, p.18), whilst Landsberg (2005) describes a barrier as “an obstacle or circumstance that keeps people or things apart; it prevents communication and bars access to advancement”.

Barriers to learning can be the result of or result in an interaction between multiple systems, as every action is also a reaction. The following barriers to learning were identified within the South African context:

- socio-economic barriers, including poverty, lack of access to basic services, exposure to danger, inaccessible environments and unsafe buildings
  - discriminatory negative attitudes and stereotyping of differences
  - inflexible curricula
  - inappropriate LoLT
  - inadequate provision of support services
  - inadequate legislation and policy
  - lack of parental recognition and involvement
  - lack of human resource development strategies,
- (Landsberg, 2005, p.18)

Barriers to learning are divided into *intrinsic* and *extrinsic*, described respectively by Nel, Nel and Hugo (2013) as conditions *within* the person, such as medical conditions and disabilities, visual-and hearing impairments, various forms of physical impairments including cerebral palsy and neurological conditions such as epilepsy, conditions *outside* the person, such as society or the school system.

### **2.12.1 Socio-economic barriers**

Socio-economic barriers:

include aspects such as severe poverty, the family as a system, abuse, crime, violence in the neighbourhood and at home gangsterism, lack of basic amenities such as water, electricity, proper housing and toilets, gender issues in cultural groups and society, and a home language that differs from the language of learning and teaching (Nel, Nel & Hugo, 2013, p.15).



According to the DoE (2002, p.131), there is a direct relationship between education and the socio-economic conditions in every society. The following barriers are created as a result of socio-economic factors:

- Poor reading and print background. Parents of these learners often had limited education opportunities
  - Lack of exposure to numerical concepts
  - Sensory deprivation, resulting from a lack of opportunities during early childhood to explore the environment and wider world
  - Poor oral language development due to a lack of communication, interaction and learning opportunities
  - Poor self-image
  - Impact of alcoholism and violence
  - Mobility of family creates lack of continuity in learning as a result of school hopping
  - Learners move from nuclear family to extended family
  - Late enrolment at school
- (DoE, 2005, p.14)

### **2.12.2 Poverty and underdevelopment**

Hughes (2010, p.49) states that one of the most common definitions of poverty covers those who have less than 50 per cent of the average national income. It may be “experienced during early childhood-particularly deep and persistent poverty-has a negative impact on children’s cognitive and verbal development as well as their emotional and behavioral outcomes” (Saracho & Spodek, 2013, p.11). According to Landsberg (2005), many South Africans live in poverty created by factors such as inadequate education, low wages, unemployment, and malnutrition, an opportunity-deprived existence, technological backwardness, overpopulation, disadvantageous surroundings, conflict, violence, crime, substance abuse and psychological degradation. According to Pianta et al. (2007, p.218), children in families with low incomes experience negative consequences for both cognitive functioning and school achievement, particularly during the preschool and early elementary school years. “The teacher must understand the effect poverty has on all aspects of an individual’s

life and must accept that all parents, irrespective of their income, want their children to succeed at school” (Van Wyk & Lemmer, 2009, p.163).

The researcher, who has been working in this area for many years, is aware of many parents and guardians who are either unemployed or have a low income. Many learners go to school without food, and are exposed to violence and abuse on a regular basis. Pianta et al. (2007, p.228) assert that children in poverty lack resources for decent housing, food, clothing, books and other educational resources, child care, early education, and healthcare. The DoE (2002, p.133), states that undernourishment in children leads to a lack of concentration and impacts negatively on learning. These learners mostly come from overcrowded households, and are exposed to violence and abuse on a regular basis. Van Wyk and Lemmer (2009) feels that schools need to make a concerted effort to make learners and families living in poverty feel welcome in the school, and give them the necessary respect they deserve.

### **2.12.3 Attitudes**

According to the DoE:

Negative and harmful attitudes towards differences in our society remain critical barriers to learning and development. Discriminatory attitudes resulting from prejudice against people on the basis of race, class, gender, culture, disability, religion, ability, sexual preference and other characteristics manifest themselves as barriers to learning when such attitudes are directed towards learners in the education system (DoE, 2005, p.14).

Teachers need to reflect on their attitudes towards low-income parents and not tend to ‘blame the victim’.

### **2.12.4 Curriculum**

Curriculum may be defined as “a multilevel process that encompasses what happens in an early education classroom each day” (Jackman, 2012, p.35), and “As young children participate in group settings (such as preschool, play groups, child care, kindergarten) their active participation should be guided by developmentally appropriate curriculum” (Eileen Allen & Cowdery, 2009 p.8). According to Hughes

(2010, p.82) it is part of children's learning experience and can deeply influence the effectiveness of the learning outcomes. EWP 6, (2001) states that one of the most significant barriers to learning for learners is the curriculum but that it excludes many learners with barriers to learning because of different aspects:

- the content
- the language (medium of instruction)
- classroom organization
- teaching methodologies
- pace of the teaching, and the time available to complete the curriculum,
- teaching and learning support materials
- assessment

(EWP 6, DoE, 2010 p.29)

Erradu and Weeks (2013) state that since 1994 an abundance of initiatives have been taken to reform the education system, specifically the curriculum, to make it more inclusive. They state that in order to overcome barriers to learning the curriculum has to be differentiated in order to support these learners.

According to the DBE (2011, pp.4-5):

In responding to the diversity of learner needs in the classroom, it is imperative to ensure differentiation in curriculum delivery to enable access to learning for all learners. Curriculum differentiation is about thinking about teaching and learning in new and different ways. It is about innovation rather than a recipe.

### **2.13 CARE AND SUPPORT FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING**

All children require care and support in order to thrive and learn, however, some, in particular those from poor communities, have additional support needs, hence, "The DBE has adopted Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, acknowledging "that an individual's behaviour is determined by multiple spheres of influence. These range from very direct influences such as child's relationship with a caregiver, to more indirect influences, such as socio-economic policies" (DBE, 2010, p.5-6). This model has numerous benefits in providing care and support to learners as well as educators

through schools, such as improved access, retention and achievement outcomes, school based support that allows for the early identification of children at risk, service providers being able to identify needs that might otherwise not have been addressed and enabling school-based services to transfer skills to educators and improve educator wellbeing, as many of them lack the skills and motivation to provide care and support to learners.

Understanding and addressing these barriers to education is imperative if the underachieving Grade R learner is to be effectively supported within the South African education system.

## **2.14 CONCLUDING REMARKS**

The chapter has focused on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory as theoretical framework and discussed different theories in Early Childhood Development, the concept of underachievement, Triarchic Model of Minority Children's School Achievement, as well as Early Childhood Education and development in South Africa, including the Grade R learner, Grade R practitioner, role of parents and the learning environment. Barriers learners may encounter as well as the ecological systems approach to understanding and addressing barriers to education were briefly discussed.

The following chapter will present an overview of methods and procedures employed to answer the research question, which focuses on investigating the needs and challenges of underachieving Grade R learners.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 INTRODUCTION**

As discussed in Chapter One, this study grew out of awareness that an increasing number of learners are entering Grade 1 with barriers to learning and development and therefore underachieving. As a mainstream and learning support teacher and learning support advisor of many years, the researcher agrees with Education White Paper 6 (EWP 6) "...that all children and youth can learn, and that all children and youth need support" (EWP 6, 2001, p.17). Barr and Parrett (2008, p.12) place further emphasis on the claim that all children can learn by asserting that even the poor, language challenged and learning disabled can achieve acceptable standards of academic excellence and school success.

Bronfenbrenner's eco-systemic theoretical approach used in this study acknowledges the dynamic interaction of the multiple systems impacting on the learner's development. This chapter describes the research paradigm, design and methodology as well as sampling of the participants. It also provides a detailed description of data collection processes and ethical considerations relevant to the study.

#### **3.2 RESEARCH CONTEXT**

The study is contextually based in a largely mixed race area of Mitchell's Plain, in a school that serves a diverse group of learners. Unemployment in the area is rife, coupled with substance abuse, gangsterism, women and child abuse and a high crime rate. The community is severely challenged by poverty and the majority of households are single parents and/or large families with low levels of education. The school has a history of producing low academic results, particularly in Grade 1, and was therefore identified to be part of the Western Cape Education Department Grade R pilot project in 2011. The school is funded by the DoE and has been declared a no-fee school since 2014. It school is fully financially supported by the Western Cape Department of Education.

### 3.3 THE RESEARCH PARADIGM

Paradigms may be defined as “models, perspectives or conceptual frameworks that help us to organize our thoughts, beliefs, views and practices into a logical whole and consequently inform our research design” (Basit, 2010 p.14). Bertram and Christiansen (2014) argue that “a research paradigm represents a particular worldview that defines, for the researcher who holds this view, what is acceptable, to research and how this should be done”, and working in a particular paradigm determines the following choices:

- Type of questions supposed to be asked
- What can be observed and investigated
- How data will be collected
- Interpretations of findings

The proposed study has been conducted within an interpretative paradigm, defined by Maree and Van der Westhuizen (2009, p.20) as a view of social science, a lens through which to examine the practice of research. With focus “on smaller numbers and in-depth analysis of human behavior and perceptions, acknowledging differences as well as similarities” (Basit, 2010 p.14), it interprets social reality as viewed by the research participants. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2005) state that the interpretative paradigm begins with the individual who sets out to understand his or her interpretations of the world in which he or she is embedded. For Henning et al. (2004), it is a communal process, informed by participating practitioners and scrutinized and/or endorsed by others, and the researcher has to look at different places and at different things in order to understand the phenomenon.

The following are criteria for quality in interpretivist research (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014):

- Trustworthiness is strengthened by detailed descriptions of data
- Data must be authentic and reflect experiences of respondents
- The researcher must be able to show how they have analysed data and come to conclusions
- Findings cannot be generalized to all context, however they can be transferred to a different context
- Subjectivity of the researcher in the process is accepted.

### 3.4 THE RESEARCH DESIGN

The investigation took a qualitative approach to identifying the needs and challenges of underachieving Grade R learners: “A research design is a strategic framework for action that serves as a bridge between the research question and the execution or implementation of the research. It provides a plan that specifies how the research will be executed in order to answer the research question” (Durrheim 2006, p.34). According to Drew, Hardman and Hosp (2008), the design must emphasize the logic that links the data to be collected and the conclusions drawn to the initial questions of the study.

Of various types of designs that can be used in qualitative studies, ethnography examines the cultural characteristics of a group, while a case study describes one or more cases in depth. Phenomenology is used to describe individuals’ experiences of a phenomenon, while the purpose of grounded theory is to inductively describe and explain a phenomenon (Johnson & Christensen, 2012, p.383), or present “a study of the world as it appears to individuals when they lay aside the prevailing understandings of those phenomena and revisit their immediate experience of the phenomena” (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2007, p.495). The aim of this study is to investigate the needs and challenges of underachieving Grade R learners through the experiences of practitioners, therefore a phenomenological design was considered appropriate.

Phenomenology, according to Gall, Gall and Borg (2007, p.495):

...originated as a philosophical movement founded by Edmund Husserl, [who] believed that the starting point for knowledge was the self’s ... consciousness and experience of a phenomenon ... [whilst] phenomenological research is to obtain a view into the research participants’ life-worlds and to understand the personal meanings constructed from their ‘lived experiences’.

According to McMillan and Schumacher (2010, p.24), phenomenology aims at transforming lived experience into a description of essence, and allows for reflection and analysis: “Rooted in philosophy and psychology the assumption is that there are many ways of interpreting the same experience and the meaning of the experience to each person is what constitutes reality” (Ary, et al., 2006, p.461). For Savin-Baden and Howell Major (2013), phenomenologists seek not only to uncover experiences of individuals but also show how these individuals experience the phenomenon.

Van Manen (1990, as cited in Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013: p.30) developed the following guide as a structure when undertaking phenomenological research:

- Turning to a phenomenon which seriously interest us and commits us to the world;
- Investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it;
- Reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon;
- Describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting;
- Maintaining a strong and orientated pedagogical relation to the phenomenon;
- Balancing the research context by considering the parts and the whole.

This study is phenomenological as it deals with the lived experiences of Grade R practitioners, as they encounter the phenomenon under study on a daily basis. The research methodology that guided this study was determined by the interpretative design using phenomenology as a qualitative research approach.

### **3.4.1 Qualitative research approach**

McMillan and Schumacher (2010, p.320) note that qualitative research “begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem”, whilst McMillan and Schumacher (2010), Johnson and Christensen (2012), Ary et al., and Basit (2010) state that it relies primarily on non-numerical data. Qualitative methods aim to discover and understand how people construct meaning from the way they perceive their lives, and “the researcher endeavours to understand the social world as it is experienced, lived or felt by the research participants” (Basit, 2010, p.16). The researcher is therefore able to explain social reality as it is perceived and created by the research participants themselves. Part of the fieldwork in this study involved interviews with Grade R practitioners as participants who were knowledgeable around the phenomenon under investigation.

The investigation took place in a school in the natural setting of a Grade R learning environment, and a qualitative approach allowed the researcher to collect data face-to-face by interacting with selected persons (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006, p.315). The researcher interviewed Grade R practitioners and observed Grade R learners and



practitioners in their natural setting. The researcher scrutinized practitioners' planning as well as learners' written work and learners' profiles.

### **3.4.2 Role of the researcher**

The role of the researcher as a person is critical to the quality of the scientific knowledge and the soundness of ethical decisions in qualitative inquiry. It further involves the moral integrity of the researcher, his or her sensitivity and commitment to moral issues and action (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009, p.74). As qualitative researchers "become immersed in the situations and the phenomena under study" (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006, p.316), they have personal contact with their participants. In this study, the researcher had personal contact with the Grade R learners and practitioners, and assumed the role of participant observer and interviewer after obtaining informed consent. This was the sole purpose of data collection (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006, p.344), and interpretative analysis of the data prior to writing up the report (Lodico, Spaulding & Voegtle, 2010, p. 161).

As previously stated, being an official working within the WCED, with specific focus on providing support to schools, the researcher was prone to particular ethical concerns. An evaluation needs credibility to be useful so the researcher ensured objectivity as far as possible, to minimize the effect personal opinions might have on the study (Patton, 2002).

### **3.4.3 Site**

A research site is "the space or place of the topic under study" (Savin-Baden & Major 2013, p.307), in this case a primary school in Metro South Education District, an impoverished area on Mitchell's Plain. The school was established in 1985 and offered instruction to approximately 800 learners from Grades R to 7. One of the Grade R Pilot schools chosen by the WECD in 2011 and 2012, because of the high failure rate in Grade 1, the results of the pilot study indicated that its learners presented with severe barriers to learning and development. The researcher had also been working in this District for the previous 12 years and was familiar with the school.

### **3.4.4 Sample**

Purposive sampling was used to select the participants, justified by Ary et al., (2006) because qualitative researchers cannot observe everything about the group or site that might be relevant to the research problem. McMillan and Schumacher (2006, p.343), describe it as a strategy to choose small groups or individuals likely to be knowledgeable and informative about the phenomenon of interest. This sample comprised two Grade R practitioners of a primary school, twenty underachieving Grade R learners, selected by the Grade R practitioners and to be observed for the strengthening of the findings. With this motivation the researcher assumed that they could provide information-rich data that would shed abundant light on the research under investigation. The researcher also chose them because of a greater familiarity with this context and the school being accessible.

## **3.5 DATA COLLECTION STRATEGIES**

Before the process of data collection began, the researcher obtained permission from the Western Cape Education Department and principal of the school. Consent from the practitioners and parents as well as assent from the learners were sought. A set of letters were written explaining in detail the intent of the research and what role the researcher would play in the investigation. Grade R practitioners were explained the need to use a *Dictaphone* and given the option to accept or refuse. The researcher adopted a positive stance at all times in order to maintain a good relationship.

The researcher made use of the three most common methods of research (Ary et al., 2006, p.474), detailed as follows.

### **3.5.1 Observations**

Observation was used as a technique to gather data that would promote understanding of why Grade R learners underachieve. The researcher scrutinized the learning environment, both inside and outside the classroom, and observed practitioners and learners' interaction with each other. McMillan and Schumacher (2006, p. 206) define observation as "the watching of behavioral patterns of people in certain situations to obtain information about the phenomenon of interest and ... observing all potentially

relevant phenomena and taking extensive field notes without specifying in advance exactly what is to be observed” (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006, p.207). In addition, “Qualitative observations help the researcher to understand important meanings and gain insights into an under-research field” (Palaiologou, 2012, p.122).

The assumption in this research study is that there are numerous challenges Grade R learners and practitioners face that impede effective teaching and learning. The researcher envisaged answering the research question by observing the following:

- learning environment – structure of classroom – resources and display thereof
- timetable, planning and assessment
- teaching methods
- class/social interaction
- language and communication
- workbooks, assessment and learners’ profiles

The motivation was to gain a first-hand account of the situation under investigation. McMillan (2012) describes field notes as detailed written descriptions of what was observed, including the researcher’s interpretations, whilst Boudah, (2011) asserts that the observational data must have depth and detail. The descriptions must be factual, accurate, and thorough (Patton, 2002, p.23, as cited in Boudah, 2011, p.134), so during my visits to the school I observed the physical setting of the classroom and available resources. The purpose of the observation was also to see how practitioners taught and interacted with the underachieving learners.

### **3.5.2 Participant observation**

The main aim of observation is to study participants in their natural milieu, in which the behaviour occurs. The researcher chose to be a participant observer because extended time was to be spent with the participants in their natural setting, in which first-hand information can be obtained on how they go about daily. According to McMillan and Schumacher (2006), an advantage of this approach is that permission to collect and record data can be requested for ethical purposes. Also, the researcher can obtain feedback about his or her observations and draw tentative conclusions from the people in the research study. Having obtained permission to conduct the research, the researcher visited the school to gain insight into the life-world of the participants on a

normal school day. Observations were completed between February and March 2015. The researcher made extensive notes of the observations. The notes have been used in reporting the key themes.

### **3.5.3 Interviewing**

Interviewing “provides access to the context of people’s behavior and thereby provides a way for researchers to understand the meaning of that behavior” (Seidman, 2006, p.10), whilst McMillan (2012) describes the interview as a form of data collection whereby questions are asked orally and subjects’ responses recorded, either verbatim or summarized. Boudah (2011) states that an interview is an opportunity for the researcher to get information about beliefs, perspectives, and views from the participant, whilst Bogdan and Biklen (2007) regard them as a dominant strategy for data collection, to be used in conjunction with participant observation, document analysis or other techniques. Gall, Gal and Borg (2007) believe that the goal of qualitative research interviews is to help respondents express their views of a phenomenon in their own terms.

Of the three types of interviews in qualitative research, structured, semi-structured and unstructured (McMillan 2012, p.167), semi-structured were selected because the questions were open-ended, specific and intended to allow for individual responses from the participants. They allowed the researcher to probe and clarify. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) state that this kind of interview seeks to obtain descriptions of the interviewees’ lived world with respect to interpretation of the meaning of the described phenomena.

An interview guide was used to focus on certain themes and questions. Gall et al. (2007) contend that the use of an interview guide is based on the assumption that there is common information to be obtained from each respondent. The researcher will have the freedom to determine the order in which the topics are explored. According to Fraenkel and Wallen (2008), the outline of an interview guide increases the comprehensiveness of the data and makes collection systematic for each respondent. The logical gaps in the data can be anticipated and closed so the interview is conversational and situational.

After the observation period, the researcher interviewed both Grade R practitioners to understand and make sense of some of the behaviour observed. Participants indicated

that they had no problem with the interview being recorded, so with their agreement to participate the researcher confirmed the date, time and length of the face-to-face interview. The semi-structured interviews were held in the Grade R classrooms, with an interview guide that contained questions important to the research.

The interviews were conducted in English and recorded on a *Dictaphone* to accurately capture information and avoid misunderstandings. The same questions were asked to the two individual participants at different time slots. The first questions concerned the Grade R practitioners' qualifications, experience, understanding and support of the underachieving learner, planning and assessment. The remaining questions focused on the school management team (SMT) and parental support.

#### **3.5.4 Documents**

McMillan (2012, p.295) defines 'documents' as written records, whilst Savin-Baden and Howell Major (2013) believe that these documents can provide the researcher with a rich and often readily accessible source of information for understanding participants and research context. The researcher used underachieving Grade R learners' profiles and written work, and practitioners' planning and assessments as sources of data. These documents were studied to determine a pattern in support provided to underachieving learners. The assessment and recording sheets were used to determine learners' academic performance.

### **3.6 ANALYSIS OF DATA**

Savin-Baden and Howell Major (2013, p.434) state that the process of data analysis involves breaking it down into meaningful parts, whilst McMillan (2012, p.295) sees analysis as starts during and after data collection. Qualitative data analysis is primarily inductive and comparative, described by Merriam (2009, p.169) as recursive and dynamic. Mertens (2010, p. 423) states "that analysis in qualitative studies designed within the ethnographic or phenomenological traditions is recursive, findings are generated and systematically built as successive pieces of data are gathered" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; M.Q. Patton, 2002; Wolcott, 2001), whilst according to Gay, Mills and Airasian (2006, p.467), qualitative data analysis requires the researcher to be patient and reflective in a process that strives to make sense of multiple data sources,

including field notes from observations and interviews, questions, maps, pictures, audiotape transcripts and videotaped observations. It is an attempt by the researcher to summarize collected data in a dependable and accurate manner, and is a cyclical, iterative process of reviewing data for common topics or themes.

The researcher decided to make use of the thematic analysis because, as indicated by Savin-Baden and Howell Major (2013), it allowed the researcher to rely on intuition and sensing, rather than being bound by hard and fast rules of analysis. The researcher was guided by the following recommendations of Braun and Clarke (2006, in Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013, p.440) for conducting thematic analysis:

- familiarize yourself with your data
- generate initial codes
- search for themes
- review themes
- define and name themes
- produce the report

The researcher spent weeks transcribing the data. The process commenced by reading and familiarizing myself with the data. Verbatim accounts of the interviews were transcribed, different categories relating to the research topic formed and information from interviews, observations and documents analysed and arranged according to themes. Thereafter, themes were reviewed, defined and named. Finally, the researcher summarised the data and produced the report.

### **3.7 REPORTING THE FINDINGS**

According to Lodico, Spaulding and Voegtler (2010), writing a research report is the final step in qualitative data analysis. It is also written in a narrative manner, which often is enjoyable to read. Therefore the results obtained from this study were presented as a narrative discussion rather than a scientific report.

### **3.8 VERIFICATION**

Methods of trustworthiness are discussed in the following paragraphs.

#### **3.8.1 Validity**

According to Fraenkel (2008), validity refers to the appropriateness, correctness, meaningfulness, and usefulness of the specific inferences researchers make based on the data they collect. In qualitative designs it is “the degree to which the interpretations have mutual meanings between the participants and the researcher” (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006, p.324) and depends on the extent to which the interpretations have mutual meanings between participants and research. To enhance validity of this research investigation, the following strategies were used:

- persistent fieldwork
- verbatim participants’ accounts
- mechanically recorded data
- participant review (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p.330)

#### **3.8.2 Credibility**

McMillan (2012) defines credibility as the extent to which the data, data analysis and conclusions are accurate and trustworthy. The *Dictaphone* enabled accurate verbatim transcripts to be made and the researcher stayed long in the field, closely engaging with the participants gathering data to present the results for the findings. A summary of the analysis was provided to the participants as they were asked to comment on the accuracy of the findings.

#### **3.8.3 Triangulation**

Triangulation involves collecting data from different sources (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014), defined by McMillan (2012) as the comparison of findings made using different techniques. Data was collected by interviewing the practitioners at different times, observing the underachieving Grade R learners and practitioners in their natural setting and taking field notes. Learners’ profiles, books and practitioners

planning and assessment were also scrutinized to see if they pointed to the same conclusion. By combining the analysis with findings from the different sources the trustworthiness of the analysis was demonstrated.

### **3.9 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Ethics are “the principles and guidelines that help us uphold the things we value” (Johnson & Christensen, 2012, p.99), whilst for (Hoy, 2004, as cited in Savin-Baden, 2013) they are “obligations that present themselves as necessarily to be fulfilled but are neither forced on one or are enforceable”. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) point out that informed consent and the protection of the informants from harm are the two issues that dominate traditional official guidelines of ethics in research with human subjects.

The following ethical considerations were adhered to before and during the research.

#### **3.9.1 Informed consent**

Informed consent is “agreeing to participate in a study after being informed of its purpose, procedures, risks, benefits, alternative procedures, and limits of confidentiality” (Johnson & Christensen, 2012, p.107), whilst McMillan and Schumacher (2010) state that to gain permission most researchers assure their participants of confidentiality and anonymity as well as informing them what the data will be used for. The researcher approached the participants personally and provided them with clear explanations regarding the aims of the study, timeframe, as well as how the interviews were to be conducted. The researcher assured them of confidentiality and anonymity, so they understood and could make an informed choice on whether they wished to participate voluntarily in the research study.

#### **3.9.2 Approval**

Before the process of data collection commenced the researcher obtained written consent from the WCED to conduct the research (Appendix H). Written permission was sought from the principal of the school (Appendix D) and individual written consent from the participants to audiotape the interviews (Appendix B) as well as consent from the parents (Appendix E) and individual assent from each of the



underachieving Grade R learners – the researcher obtained assent by explaining the purpose and process of the study to the twenty identified Grade R learners. This was done in the presence of the practitioners. An assent form for each individual learner was completed by the practitioners on their behalf, as they are too small to read themselves. (Appendix C).

### **3.9.3 Confidentiality**

Confidentiality is “an agreement with the research investigators about what can be done with the information obtained about a research participant” (Johnson & Christensen, 2012, p.116). This means that the participants’ identity was not made known to any person other than the researcher and staff. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) assert that participants and settings should not be identifiable in print, and that researchers have a responsibility to protect the individuals’ confidences from other persons in the setting, as well as protecting the informants from the general public. The researcher assured the participants that no-one would have access to the original data except the researcher. The name of the school and the participants has been protected and practitioners are referred to as Participant A and Participant B.

### **3.10 CONCLUDING REMARKS**

In this chapter, the research design as well as the rationale for using the qualitative research approach was elucidated. It also gave an account of the research methods used to collect data. Furthermore, criteria for validity and reliability as components of trustworthiness as well as ethical requirements were included.

The results of the data gathered will be presented in the following chapter.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSIONS OF RESULTS**

#### **4.1 INTRODUCTION**

A qualitative investigation conducted as part of this study serves as a source of information in determining the needs and challenges of underachieving Grade R learners in a Mitchell's Plain primary school. The relevant literature was reviewed in Chapter Two. The interviews with the two practitioners provided valuable data to be presented verbatim in this chapter, increasing the understanding of the factors causing academic underachievement. The researcher's data is therefore based on the responses of the two key role players concerned with Grade R. Underachieving Grade R learners and practitioners were observed during classroom interaction, and the notes were transcribed. Documents of the learners and practitioners were also analysed. The data generated from the study is presented and discussed in the context of the four subheadings derived from the sub research questions posed in section 1.4 that guided the study. Discussions of the findings are presented under categorized themes supported by statements from interviews with the two Grade R practitioners, analysis of documents and observations. The data analysis method used will now be briefly discussed.

#### **4.2 BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS OF THE RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS**

In the following section, the biographical details of the research participants of the current study, selected Grade R practitioners, are presented. They are introduced from information obtained during the individual interview sessions. The participants were asked in the first five minutes of the interview to tell the researcher about their qualifications and experience as Grade R practitioners, and their responses were written down as part of the field notes and later analysed. Assured of confidentiality and anonymity they will be identified as Participant A and B, with their true identity remaining known only to the researcher and supervisor. The biographical details of the research participants portray and convey the research context in which data was

solicited. An exposition of the research context enhances the comprehension of the presented, analysed and discussed data on the subject at hand.

**Table 4.1:** Biographical variables of the participants

<b>PARTICIPANT</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>
<b>GENDER</b>	Female	Female
<b>QUALIFICATIONS</b>	Level 4	Matric
<b>EXPERIENCE</b>	2 years	1 year 6 months

### **4.3 PRESENTATION OF THE RESULTS**

The data collected centred around the main research question, “What are the needs and challenges of underachieving Grade R learners in a Mitchell’s Plain primary school?” The data presented was obtained through qualitative methods of collecting data. The following methods of data collection were used: individual interviews with only the two Grade R practitioners, analysis of documents and observations. The results and analysis of data are presented and discussed according to identified themes and sub-themes of the needs and challenges of underachieving Grade R learners in a Mitchell’s Plain primary school. Many of the findings overlap and are mentioned in more than one theme.

The main themes are:

1. Needs of underachieving Grade R learners
2. Challenges of underachieving Grade R learners
3. Factors contributing to the underachievement of Grade R learners
4. Strategies Grade R practitioners currently use to support underachieving Grade R learners

Recommendations are then made for possible strategies to support these learners.

As introduced in Chapter Two, Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory refers to the microsystem as the level that encompasses the environments of parents, family, peers, child care, schools, neighbourhood and religious groups. This level involves roles, relationships and patterns of daily activities that shape many aspects of

cognitive, social, emotional, moral and spiritual development. The mesosystem influences the relationship between the individual's home and school. It is crucial for these two groups to interact with one another. The results revealed that the Grade R learners have various needs, challenges and factors impacting on their learning and development, discussed in the following sections. The results reiterated the relationship between the various systems as set out by Bronfenbrenner.

#### **4.4 THEME 1: NEEDS OF UNDERACHIEVING GRADE R LEARNERS**

##### **4.4.1 Grade R practitioners' responses to in-depth interviews on needs of underachieving Grade R learners**

The Grade R practitioners were asked what they perceived to be the needs of the underachieving Grade R learners. They highlighted the following:

###### ***4.4.1.1 Lack of resources***

The need for outdoor equipment such as a jungle gym, books and stationery were mentioned as needs. These underachieving Grade R learners need to engage in physical activities inside and outside the classroom to promote growth and development. Moreover, to support their gross and fine motor needs, as mentioned in Chapter Two, it is the responsibility of the early childhood development practitioner to set up and manage a variety of active learning activities that are appropriate to the developmental needs of the learners. The analysis revealed that the practitioners were usually unable attend to the needs of the learners due to lack of resources.

The need for the physical environment to be conducive to learning and resources is one of the factors highlighted in the policy of the DBE (2001). The value of having adequate and appropriate physical and material resources to accommodate the needs of the underachieving Grade R learners is crucial for their development and learning. From the analysis it was clear that it is difficult and often impossible to meet the needs of these underachieving learners due to the lack of resources.

*PRA: ... we need outdoor resources equipment and outdoor play where they suppose to be out and resources and good books where we know that the Grade R learners they learn a lot through seeing pictures so if they can get*

*pictures where they can start where they can look at the picture and recognize how to write by see the pictures and feel the pictures maybe in the book, that can be my ...*

*PR B: In my opinion the needs are resources example school tools stationery like chairs tables books pencils each child don't have their own. It's always a struggle when they should share. They need dough, outdoor equipment; they need a jungle gym they always the problem is they always just need to share. They need paint 'cause there's activities that we need to do and we cannot paint.*

#### **4.4.1.2        *Need for furniture***

There is a serious need for furniture in both classes. One of the participants highlighted it:

*PR A: ...these children need especially furniture*

*PR A: As I come back again from the question where I can give you the same answer these children need especially furniture, language barriers, parents who are not their role models to them, they need support also from their parents, they cannot only learn from the teacher, also to learn from home from their parents from their role models so that is the other thing I think*

#### **4.4.1.3        *Need for parental support***

The literature study in Chapter Two found that when parents and practitioners work together the impact on the child's development and learning multiplies. The analysis revealed that if the practitioner identifies the needs of the Grade R learner as requiring the parent to be involved it becomes a problem. The lack of parental support was therefore identified as part of the needs of the underachieving Grade R learners. The lack of involvement of parents has an impact on the performance and confidence of the underachieving learners in the classroom, resulting in them experiencing more barriers to learning.

One participant made reference to the parents not helping the underachieving learner with homework:

*PRA: Parent support...it's very...it's uh, it is not there I can put it like that because I I can tell you the truth the underachieving learners there's not even one parent maybe will come and ask "teacher how's the child doing now"? and maybe I gave them uh uh uh their homework to do at home where the parents must help them but they will still come back they didn't even do their homework and then sometimes you would see ask the child "did your mommy help you...no mommy said she's gonna help me then she never did get help from home.*

#### **4.4.2 Observations on needs of underachieving Grade R learners**

The observations on needs of the underachieving learners confirm the literature study in Chapter Two, that all classrooms are challenged with diverse learning needs and that these are important factors that influence learning. Many of these learners experienced difficulties with remembering what the practitioner had taught them the previous day. They were unable to differentiate between past and present and most of were clumsy or found combining a range of movements difficult. Some had difficulty with hand/eye co-ordination and writing. It was also observed that most of the underachieving Grade R learners were impoverished. A few appeared shy and withdrawn or presented with behaviour problems. The researcher observed that the practitioners attempt to create a fantasy corner with dolls, a pram, and a wheelbarrow. It was also observed that these learners had a strong need for physical resources, such as balls, balancing beams and a jungle gym to address gross motor challenges. Furthermore, material resources such as books, crayons, pencils, and play dough were in short supply. There were not enough tables for the learners and it was observed that three learners were sitting at one kindergarten table, which added to the difficulty of writing and performing other similar tasks. This allowed for copying to easily take place.

#### **4.4.3 Document analysis on needs of underachieving Grade R learners**

The results of the documents show a serious need for these learners to be supported with their needs, such as poor writing skills. Documents (attendance registers) revealed that parents do not attend parent meetings. These underachieving Grade R learners had a need for their parents to be involved in their schooling. McKenzie and

Loebenstein (2007) emphasise in the literature results of Chapter Two that parental involvement has a positive effect on the child's success in school and a positive effect on their interactions with and support for their child, and this can enhance their learning process.

### **Discussion of the theme**

Lack of parental support, need for furniture, physical and material resources, as well as a range of different learning needs was identified. From the results it can be concluded that the parents or caregivers of these underachieving learners seemed not to care that their children were having learning difficulties at school. They placed the responsibility for the teaching and support solely on the practitioners, with no interest in their child's homework. It can be assumed that these parents themselves had a poor experience in school which left them placing a low priority of education. Parents knew their children best and could be a great source of help to the practitioner if able to assist those with barriers to learning. It is the responsibility of the school to make parents realise that they have a responsibility towards their child and the school, and they should be supportive towards at home, especially if the child has learning difficulties.

The research has also shown that resources are a serious need in both classes. The lack of physical and material resources to support the needs of the underachieving learners can be directly blamed on the immediate level, which is the school. This places great strain on the practitioners, who struggles to support these learners, and has a serious impact on the learning and development of the underachieving learners. The literature findings in Chapter Two state that these Grade R learners are in the developmental stage, interested in exploring and ready to learn. They therefore have a need to express their natural curiosity and creativity through opportunities in the environment.

The limited number of toys in the fantasy corner of both classes deprived them of the freedom to engage in fascination and dramatic play. Furthermore, these learners need a solid foundation to prepare them for formal schooling and to ensure this resources for shape, colour, sorting, matching sequencing, problem solving, to name but a few, as well as appropriate furniture for each learner must be provided by the school.

Therefore, if the school is serious about raising the academic results in Grade 1, as mentioned in Chapter One, they must provide the appropriate and necessary resources to address their learning needs, instil a love for learning, and promote optimal development to prevent these learners from underachieving and prepare them for formal schooling. The above mentioned results reiterate the strong relationship and influence of the various systems as set out by Bronfenbrenner in Chapter Two.

## **4.5 THEME 2: CHALLENGES OF UNDERACHIEVING GRADE R LEARNERS**

### **4.5.1 Grade R practitioners' responses to in-depth interviews on challenges of underachieving Grade R learners**

When asked about what challenges the underachieving Grade R learners' experience, the practitioners mentioned the following.

#### ***4.5.1.1 Language of learning and teaching (LoLT)***

From the literature study in Chapter Two, Education White Paper 6 states that different learning needs may arise at some time that can result in learners experiencing barriers to learning and one of it are inappropriate languages or language of learning and teaching. Both participants said that it was difficult and both struggled to teach these learners. English was neither the learners' mother tongue nor theirs. Most of the learners who were underachieving were actually taught in a language that was not their mother tongue, which creates a challenge because they cannot understand the instructions. In Chapter Two, the Language in Education Policy points out that the most common barriers associated with language and communication are that learners are often forced to communicate and learn in a language which they do not usually use at home and are not competent to learn effectively.

One of the participants explained that she switches languages in order for them to understand her. This was also evident during my observations in the classroom. Those who do not understand her, copy their peers. This can result in a learner wrongly being identified as having a barrier to learning if he or she is unable to recognise the mother tongue of the learner; thus creating a challenge to the learner. Moreover, the



real problem might be that the learners are unable to follow the practitioner's instruction, because the practitioner is not using his or her mother tongue. This clearly affirms the findings during the interviews that the LoLT is a major challenge to the underachieving Grade R learners and practitioners as it impacts on their learning and teaching:

*PR A: Okay, it's very difficult, especially also for me as I am Xhosa eh eh my first language is Xhosa as I came to school were the first language is English so sometimes I have to make a plan I have to plan before I came to the classroom so I can be in a good vocabulary for the children to understand what I I try what I'm teaching them. Sometimes it is also difficult also for me as a Xhosa teacher to have an English class so I have to teach the first language so that can also be also*

*PR B: I really I really don't I cannot deal with I don't really know how to deal with this I find it difficult as a teacher to teach these children even English is a barrier a language barrier for me they they copy my work that's why they know what to do then I think the work they are doing is correct at the end they are copying what I have showed them what to do yeah and sometimes I switch languages for the Afrikaans children I speak Afrikaans with them I'll explain in Afrikaans the activity in Afrikaans and I'll explain in English but what about the Xhosa children I don't explain that's why they are the ones that copy my work straight from the board.*

#### **4.5.1.2 Lack of language and vocabulary**

As mentioned above, the language of the learners as well as the language of the practitioners is their second language (Xhosa and Afrikaans). The language they use at home is therefore different from the LoLT of the school, which is English, which means that parents communicate with their children in their mother tongue and the children only hear the school language during school hours. Learners' values, norms and traditions also differ from those of the school culture, hence part of the reason for them underachieving.

The literature in Chapter Two suggests that the context and experiences practitioners create for learners to develop vocabulary and the techniques they employ when

questioning and explaining is very important. According to the results, neither the learners nor practitioners have the language skills for the interchange of instruction in English. Language skills and sufficient vocabulary are therefore needed for the underachieving learners to understand the learning process. It is crucial for practitioners to take the time to reflect and improve upon their own vocabulary. It was also pointed out in Chapter Two that many of these learners will have learning difficulties and that the early years practitioner must be especially vigilant. It is therefore of utmost importance to understand the child's development and implement good teaching.

*PR A: the language that they are using at home it can be the other challenges*

*PR B Lack of language - lack of vocabulary*

#### ***4.5.1.3 Lack of practitioner knowledge to support the underachieving Grade R learners***

Both practitioners have a lack of knowledge to support the underachieving Grade R learners. The research results in terms of support revealed that both participants were trying their best to support these learners, but they lacked knowledge and support from the school and education district. The Department of Social Development and UNICEF in Chapter Two state that practitioners must be able to interact and communicate with young children in a way that supports all aspects of learning as well as demonstrating how to facilitate growth and skills development in early childhood programmes. To further determine whether the underachieving Grade R learners are getting the appropriate support, the participants needed to explain their training and qualifications. In this regard, both practitioners were inadequately trained to teach in Grade R.

The Western Cape Government (2011) was reported in Chapter Two as pointing out that one of the challenges in the ECD sector was a lack of inadequate practitioner training. Neither of these practitioners was CAPS trained, as confirmed by the researcher's analysis, and both were unable to support underachieving learners. This is a major challenge that impacts on the support and development of these learners. In Chapter Two, CAPS states clearly that all teachers must have a sound understanding

of how to recognize and address barriers to learning and how to plan for diversity. Addressing the needs and challenges of the underachieving Grade R learners through curriculum is apparent. The results revealed that they were not trained and therefore failed to address the challenges the Grade R learners faced on a daily basis. This was confirmed by the following responses during the interviews

*PR A: ...we need to be skilled, teacher trained...*

*PR B: I have a level four qualification and I have been working this is my second year.*

*PR B: I'm going I'm studying to up-skill myself and I should approach the management for me to do CAPS training.*

#### **4.5.1.4 Lack of support from education managers**

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory demonstrates how the micro-system, for example the school, is interwoven with the meso-system, (the district), and the exo-system (provincial department) and how these are interrelated and affect each other. This may include factors that can directly and indirectly influence the underachieving learners, such as training for practitioners, efficient leadership, and assistance in curriculum adaptations, professional advice, financial support and parental support. The results in this study confirm Bronfenbrenner's theory and support the literature on issues related to the support by school management and education district that impact on the underachieving Grade R learner.

The SMT of the school and education district are expected to support and capacitate the Grade R practitioners so that they can support the underachieving Grade R learners. The lack of support by these role-players was also stressed by both participants in one of the questions that dealt with challenges they face in support of these underachieving learners. They claimed that the support they received from the different role-players was either inadequate or non-existent. Meetings were not held with the HoD so they could not ask for help. During my last visit to the school one of the practitioners reported that they had for the first time been invited by the HoD to attend a foundation phase meeting, four months after the start of the new school year.

The two practitioners supported each other by discussing how they could support these learners, both indicating that it was not enough and they did not know whether they were on the right track. One of the participants expressed dissatisfaction with the local education district's lack of support, having last seen an official of the education district in 2013. She said none of them visited her class to see where she needed help in better supporting the learners. In a conversation with one of the participants she mentioned that one of the managers of the district had come into her class the previous year, criticizing and threatening her about her responsibility to make sure that the learners were able to read by the end of that year. There was no affirmation, support or guidance from the official.

The School Management Team and District officials play a pivotal role in support of learners experiencing barriers to learning. They needed to provide the necessary guidance and support to the practitioners in order for them to support the underachieving Grade R learners. The SMT needed to monitor the practitioners continuously to ensure that quality teaching and learning took place. They needed to ensure that appropriate resources were available for the provision of quality and focused support. The research findings revealed that the SMT failed in its duty and this posed a challenge to the underachieving Grade R learners, having a major impact on their progress. Frustrations from the participants in their lack of support are reflected in the comments below:

*PR A: There is no support...lack of support from them...they failing - lack of support, no meetings with my HOD where I can ask for help and there is also no support from the management where he is supposed to guide and come to me and maybe ask where did I need help no guidance maybe I'm on the right track and so I just do things on my own which I think it can help the children.*

*PR A: My school is an English school and then there is a lot of Xhosa children in the school so so where the parents send them to the school to come and learn English and it's also coming again back to the equipment lack of support, no meetings with my HOD where I can ask for help and there is also no support from the management where he is supposed to guide and come to me and maybe ask where did I need help no guidance maybe I'm on the right track and so I just do things on my own which I*

*think it can help the children. "Silence" And the District is where they use maybe two years three years make an example I last saw them two thousand and thirteen and it's now two thousand and fifteen and not even one came into my class and ask where did I need help so that we can try to do the best for the learner*

*PR B: No support - There is no guidance, no guidance. Lack of support, lack of resources, I don't know if I am on the right track with these learners I teach them the little that little knowledge that I have I teach them. I think I am not qualified to be the perfect Grade R teacher also a language challenge. Nobody comes to my class to come check up and see if everything is in place, what do I need what do I need help with so uhm I need guidance there's no guidance there's no support*

#### **4.5.1.5 Parental involvement**

For the underachieving Grade R learners to be successful and reach their full potential, the partnership between the home, school and the learner is crucial, but often due to poor socioeconomic circumstances and unemployment most of the parents leave the learners in the care of grandparents. Sometimes it is difficult for grandparents to take care of the wellbeing of those children, especially when they are illiterate and cannot help with the schoolwork. From the literature study in Chapter Two, family factors such as family/household composition, educational level of parents, socioeconomic status/income levels and parental involvement emerged as common factors behind underachievement in schools. It was found that challenges faced by the underachieving Grade R learners were not limited to the school and that poor parental involvement was regarded as another challenge for these learners. Parents or caregivers who neglected their responsibilities created a challenge in the educational attainment of their children. Support the learners received from home can contribute greatly to the learners' confidence and performance in the classroom. The following are some of the accounts given by the practitioners as causes of underachievement in Grade R learners:

*PR B: Uhm parent support no parental guidance from the parents no involvement of parents. Uhm parents don't attend meetings, especially*

*those children who needs support those children who's got the barriers to learning the parents they don't come to the school to collect their child's report they don't come to find out how their child is doing. They don't even send a letter when I send a letter to them they don't respond, they don't reply, they don't send a letter to ask how is the child doing. I send homework with the child the child comes back with the same page I gave them. The parents don't help their children with homework. It is a fact no parent support is a fact lack of parent support.*

The above responses indicate the frustration and helplessness the practitioners experienced without the support of the parents or caregivers, who should be the ones who see to the needs and support these learners when they experience challenges. “The primary role of a parent is that of a teacher”, according to Okagaki (2010, p.13), and the literature in Chapter Two emphasised that parental involvement and family support are essential in the education of the learner. Parents of learners experiencing barriers to learning should be involved in the collaborative process of support from the outset, but the findings revealed that it was evident that parents were not supporting practitioners and practitioners felt helpless and frustrated when they invited parents to school to discuss the challenges or progress. They therefore deprived themselves of the opportunities to participate in their children’s development.

#### **4.5.2 Document analysis on challenges of underachieving Grade R learners**

In the process of engaging with the learner profiles the researcher found that some of the underachieving learners were from the surrounding community and some were being transported by taxis from nearby townships. As mentioned in Chapter One poverty, unemployment, crime and drug abuse are rife in this community. Unemployment, social grants, and self-employed status indicated on the registration forms show that the income levels of families are low. Fleisch (2008, p.55) contended that poor adults tend to be caught in chronic unemployment and underemployment, and if they are working they are employed in low paid jobs. Furthermore, it was noted that many of these underachieving learners were from households with single,

separated or divorced parents. Some of the profiles showed that the learners were staying with their grandparents. The researcher is of the opinion that the parents' poor handwriting on the registration forms was an indication of their low level of literacy. They were therefore unable to play an enabling role in pre-literacy skills development or support their children with homework, as expected by the practitioners. It can be assumed that these parents do not see the value of education. It was also noted in the learner profile that the parents' first language was not English (LoLT of the school). The attendance register of the parent meetings reflected "absent" next to the names of the underachieving learners. The learners were faced with all these challenges that impacted negatively on their learning and contributed to their underachievement.

#### **4.5.3 Observations on challenges of underachieving learners**

During a physical education activity in class, the researcher noted that these learners were challenged with gross motor skills. They were unable to catch, skip, crawl or jump in and out of the hoops. They were challenged with fine motor problems and their hand/eye co-ordination was not established.

#### **Discussion of the theme**

Language of learning and teaching, lack of practitioner's knowledge, and lack of support from management or parents were some of the challenges highlighted by the practitioners as being responsible for the academic underachievement of the Grade R learners. The results indicated that the LoLT posed challenges in both classes. Language is used on a daily basis by most, whether verbally or mentally, as a communication system to express their thoughts. That the LoLT of the school is the second language of these parents and learners makes it difficult to communicate effectively with the practitioners. The underachieving Grade R learners is frustrated and negative and tends to reject their learning activities, resulting in them further lagging behind. The researcher has observed that some parents felt uncomfortable entering the school grounds and were therefore collecting their children at the gate. They also communicate in their first language with their children: "One of the most common barriers associated with language and communication is that learners are often forced to communicate in the language which they do not usually use at home

and are not competent to learn effectively” (DoE, 2005, p. 11). According to the Language in Education Policy (DoE, 1997a pp.3-7), parents have the right to choose the LoLT. These factors therefore disadvantage the underachieving learners in particular, because they are excluded from the teaching and learning activities, and are unable to understand the participants’ instruction. Furthermore, these underachieving learners tend to have fewer opportunities to communicate and learn social norms. The study found that because practitioner’s language is also different from the LoLT, it contributes even further to the challenges of the underachieving learners, resulting in inadequate teaching by the practitioners and causing problems in many facets of language. It is important that these learners be taught in their mother tongue to avoid moving to another language and prevent misdiagnosis of a barrier to learning. Providing learners with a good base, especially in the Foundation Phase, and teaching them in the language that they understand could eliminate many of the challenges experienced by learners.

Furthermore, the practitioners’ lack of training impacts greatly on their ability to assist the learners with learning difficulties. Not being qualified as a Grade R practitioner adds to this as the research data shows that they had no definite plan or strategy to help these underachieving learners. However, both were aware that these learners were from different socio-economic backgrounds and had different abilities, but they did not have the knowhow to differentiate their teaching methods or strategies to accommodate struggling learners. That they did not know how to differentiate within the curriculum resulted in them not knowing how to differentiate in their assessment. These impacts negatively on the underachieving learners, as well as on the confidence of the practitioners.

According to the Department of Social Development and UNICEF (2006, p.66), practitioners must be able to set up and manage a variety of active learning activities that are appropriate to the developmental needs of the child. They should be able to contribute to programme planning and evaluating the assessment of children’s progress and administration of the learning programmes. According to the DoE (2005), teachers need an assessment approach and plan that is sufficiently flexible to accommodate a range of learning needs. They play an important role in the child’s learning, growth and development and the experience that they give to children can have lasting effects (National Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement, 2011). It



is their responsibility to equip learners, irrespective of their socio-economic background, race gender, physical ability or intellectual ability, with knowledge, skills and values necessary for self-fulfilment, and meaningful participation in society as citizens of a free country (DoE, 2011).

The study further found a serious lack of support from the school, parents and the DoE was impacting on the underachieving Grade R learners, resulting in them underachieving. During the time of interviews, the researcher noticed that the morale of the practitioners was low and perceived that they felt like failures and incompetent, because they lacked the training and skills to support the underachieving learners. Parents failed to attend meetings, collect their child's report card or assist with homework. The literature study in Chapter Two states that "Homework forms a crucial part of the learning process from the earliest grades" (Van Wyk & Lemmer, 2009, p.87). It is however the school's responsibility to give clear guidance on the type of homework and how it should be done. Van Wyk and Lemmer (2009) are of the opinion that families exercise by far the most powerful and lasting influence upon the attitudes, behaviour and academic performance of children and young people. It is the ideal for the school to form partnerships with parents, but the differences in family structure, parenting arrangements, socio-economic status and cultural background of these learners makes it difficult. This affirms Bronfenbrenner's theory that human development occurs because of interacting systems that result in change, growth and development, such as physical, biological, psychological, social and cultural. It is clear that the different role-players at school level (SMT), District and parents are unable to provide underachieving learners with the necessary support because of their not working together.

Support for the underachieving learners therefore requires involvement from school, DoE and parents. All three stakeholders fail these learners. The relevance of Bronfenbrenner's theory explained in Chapter One and Two is hereby emphasised in terms of the micro level (school), meso level (uninvolved parents) and exo level (District) not working together and so failing the underachieving Grade R learners.

## **4.6 THEME 3: FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE UNDERACHIEVEMENT OF GRADE R LEARNERS**

The research question that provided the data was: “What are the factors contributing to the underachievement of Grade R learners?”, and it is confirmed that the classroom factors can have an impact on the development and learning of the underachieving Grade R learner. Barriers to learning and development as discussed in Chapter Two refers to the difficulties that arise within the education system as a whole, the learning site and/or within the learner him/herself which prevent both the system and the learner needs from being met (DoE, 2005, p.5). This affirms Bronfenbrenner’s theory, which demonstrates how the different systems impacts on the learner. This section discusses the factors contributing to the underachievement of Grade R learners.

### **4.6.1 Document analysis on factors contributing to the academic underachievement of Grade R learners**

The researcher studied the documents to determine how the practitioners conducted their planning, and to see the pattern in support provided to the underachieving learners in both Grade R classes. The learners’ written work was used to ascertain the specific learning difficulties they experienced. Learner profiles were scrutinized to gain a sense of their socio-economic background.

#### ***4.6.1.1 Planning***

Planning was haphazard and the school did not provide them with CAPS policy documents. Practitioners used copies that they received from another school, dated 2013. There was no evidence of guidance by the HoD or District Curriculum Advisor and no definite, structured daily or weekly planning. The results here reiterate Bronfenbrenner’s theory and support the literature on issues related to the management factors. Furthermore, neither was CAPS trained and there was no differentiated planning for the underachieving learners. A positive factor is that the two practitioners discussed what they needed to teach the learners, although in a limited way. Both indicated that it was not enough and they did not know whether they were on the right track. The researcher observed in the educator portfolio an empty list with dates for moderation from the HoD, but that did not happen. From this

observation it can be said that there was a visible absence from the HoD of guidance and support. Analysis of the results revealed that if the HoD and officials who were supposed to guide and support the practitioners fail in their duties this is problematic.

#### **4.6.1.2      *Assessment***

Learners were given a Baseline Assessment from end of 2014 to complete at the beginning of the year. However, this was too advanced for the learners and it was observed that learners completed assessment in groups at tables, which resulted in them copying and not giving a true reflection of what they had mastered. Assessment and recording by practitioners were haphazard. One practitioner used an old diary to record what learners were struggling with and there was no evidence to show that information from the assessment was used to plan for the underachieving learners. Assessments for work by the underachieving learners were completed at the practitioners' table and one practitioner indicated that she guided them because they did not understand what was expected. This process is flawed as it does not reveal the learners' true ability. It is clear that practitioners must be trained in CAPS, which states that all teachers must have a sound knowledge of how to recognize and address barriers to learning and how to plan for diversity.

#### **4.6.1.3      *Learner profiles***

Profiles revealed that many of these underachieving learners were from households with single parents, divorced or separated. Some parents were unemployed, self-employed, or receive social grants. This is confirmed by the literature in Chapter Two, that many South Africans live in poverty created by factors such as inadequate education, low wages, unemployment, disadvantageous surroundings, violence, crime and psychological degradation. In Chapter One it was stated that approximately 40 percent of young children in South Africa grow up in conditions of poverty and neglect (Education White Paper 5, 2001). Many are raised by grandparents or stay with them. IsiXhosa and Afrikaans were indicated as home language. Registration forms were completed in weak handwriting by parents/guardians and most of it was incomplete. The DoE (2005, p.14) states that parents of learners with poor reading and print background often had limited education opportunities.

The researcher could gather from the learner's addresses that some of the came from the townships approximately 30 kilometres from the school and some from the surrounding community. Many made use of transport to and from school and often arrived late or were absent because of lack of finances to pay for it. Chapter Two clearly states that there is a direct relationship between education and the socio-economic conditions in society. The analysis revealed that many of the barriers to learning and development are created as a result of these learners' poor socio-economic backgrounds.

#### **4.6.2 Grade R practitioners' responses to in-depth interviews on factors contributing to the underachievement of Grade R learners**

Having presented and discussed the results in the documents, it is now necessary to report on the results of the interviews conducted with the two participants. It is intended to increase the understanding of the reasons these Grade R learners underachieve. Direct quotations are provided to reflect the voice of the participants. Their home language is not English and the reader is cautioned that some quotations contain grammatical errors and might be difficult to comprehend. When asked about the factors contributing to the academic underachievement of the Grade R learners, the following themes emerged.

##### **4.6.2.1 *Lack of perceptual skills***

Perceptual skills form a critical part in the development of a young child. It can complicate the learning process and the acquisition of language. A lack of perceptual skills delays learning and development. Many of these learners come from poor families with parents or caregivers who were not educated to know the importance of early stimulation. Lack of perceptual skills was mentioned by one of the participants, but is more serious when the practitioners do not know how to identify and address it.

*PR B*            *these children struggle with perceptual skills for example uh jumping, running, rolling from one side to the other side, holding the bean bag on your head, walking on a straight line, throwing a ball to one another, yeah.*

It was evident that the practitioners lack the skills to support the learners with their perceptual skills delays. It is therefore of pivotal importance that the Grade R practitioners be empowered with skills to address these gaps encountered by the learners, but moreover, that they first be trained in the identification thereof.

#### **4.6.2.2 Planning**

According to the DBE (2011), teachers need to consider different approaches, methodologies and strategies when teaching. The content is set out but it is the teachers' duty to plan how they will teach it to the different learners in the classroom. Both practitioners recognised that they did not know how to plan for underachieving learners.

*PR A: Ugh, okay how do you plan, I can take maybe those underachieve learners and make things I will get to their level maybe ah ah ah make a plan of level one where I know I can put them not uh uh because curriculum are not the same I would make a plan where I can accommodate their thinking and easiest way how do they get it easiest way for them.*

*PR B: I don't plan for them at all. I don't have a specific plan*

It can be concluded that the practitioners had realised that because the HoD and District were not providing the support, monitoring or evaluation, they neglected and ignored some of their responsibilities, and knew no one checked them. If the management played their part, practitioners would have definite guidance in supporting the underachieving Grade R learners.

#### **4.6.2.3 Assessment**

According to the DBE (2011), one of the key principles of assessment is that it informs one of what support a learner needs to progress to another level. Assessment is also supportive teaching practice, but conducted by the participants for these underachieving learners it appeared vague and problematic. They needed guidance and support in this regard:

*PR A: Okay, I assess them most of the time their activities through their outdoor play when they play outside how they communicate where whether they maybe when they outside they can communicate but when they inside maybe they can also struggle and during their lunch uh uh uh snack time is also where I'm assessing them where maybe a child don't give me answers but when time when it's eating time maybe there's something coming out of that child some there are learners that cannot speak to me but when they having their snack time with their friends that time they can speak to their friends so that is the other time that I am assessing my learners.*

*PR B: As part of the whole class*

As discussed in the Chapter Two, practitioners should assess the progress of each child through continuous observation to provide information about the child's development in all aspects of emotional, physical, intellectual and personal growth. It should be performed qualitatively to assist children in their development. This indicates that underachieving learners must be assessed correctly in order to support them appropriately, thus showing a need for practitioners to be trained in different assessment strategies.

### **4.6.3 Observations on factors contributing to the academic underachievement of Grade R learners**

Classroom factors that contribute to the academic underachievement of the Grade R learners were observed and are discussed as follows.

#### ***4.6.3.1 The learning environment***

The literature in Chapter Two refers to the learning environment as a place or setting in which learning occurs. The psychosocial learning environment, which covers psychological and social factors, and the physical environment, which includes classroom space, level of noise, classroom displays, resources and arrangement of furniture, are two key dimensions of the learning environment. The researcher observed that the classrooms were overcrowded with too many learners. Both classes

had an inadequate supply of tables, pushed against each other to create space for three learners at one small table. Learners did not have enough space to complete written activities at their tables and learning materials such as play dough, scissors, beanbags, suitable story books, crayons and paintbrushes were in short supply. The researcher observed that the practitioners were not creative or resourceful. There was an attempt by both practitioners to create a “theme table”, however it was not structured. Most books on display were not suitable for Grade R and there were no definite literacy or numeracy displays. The fantasy corner has only a few dolls, a pram and a wheelbarrow. It was observed that learners lacked concentration and presented with behavioural problems in the classroom. Chapter Two confirmed that undernourishment in children leads to a lack of concentration and affects the learner negatively (DOE, 2002, p.133). From the observations it is evident that teaching and learning suffer and practitioners find it difficult to support the underachieving learners.

#### ***4.6.3.2 The daily timetable***

Both classes had timetables, but not followed according to scheduled times. The timetable in one class was lying on a small table amongst other books. Teaching time was stopped 20 minutes before snack time due to a lack of “what to teach”. Learners were asked to sit on the mat with their lunch, but had to wait for the bell before they could eat. This resulted in noisy communication with each other in their home languages. Outdoor play did not happen, due to a lack of resources and practitioners not planning for the activities.

#### ***4.6.3.3 Classroom/social interactions:***

The practitioners dominated classroom interaction and effective practitioner-learner interaction was difficult to attain because of large numbers of learners and ineffective classroom organization. The practitioners also reported that it was difficult to assess learners in such conditions as they copied each other work or were involved in group work most of the time. Not all the learners were involved in the lessons and learner-learner interaction was noisy. The practitioners reported that they had challenges with the discipline, and the researcher observed that they did indeed have difficulty

controlling the learners, getting them to listen and keeping their attention. During snack time the learners grouped themselves according to the different cultures and spoke in their mother tongue while enjoying their sandwiches. Both practitioners during this time also enjoyed a snack on their own, away from the learners.

#### ***4.6.3.4 Language and communication***

There are different ethnic groups in the classroom. The language of instruction at the school is English, however the majority of learners are isiXhosa and a number of the others were from an Afrikaans background. Policy states that the learner's home language must be used as the language of teaching (DoE, 2002c), but the practitioners used a mixture of English, Afrikaans and isiXhosa to communicate with their multilingual learners. Participant A's first language was isiXhosa and Participant B's first language Afrikaans. Sometimes specific instructions were repeated in the different languages represented in the classroom. Code switching was therefore used often. Learners gave one word answers whilst those on a higher academic level shouted out the fuller answers. Practitioners encouraged them to speak one at a time but the behaviour continued. Underachieving learners were hesitant to answer and it was observed that learners struggled to express themselves in English due to the lack of vocabulary. It can be assumed that cultural and environmental factors were contributing to this challenge. The same observation was made of the practitioners as they did not always have the vocabulary to bring across the curriculum content, or explain themselves to the learners or to the researcher during the interview.

#### **Discussion of the theme**

According to the research results, various factors impact on the underachievement of the Grade R learners. Practitioners' lack of training impacts greatly on their ability to help the learners with learning difficulties. Not being qualified as a Grade R practitioner adds to this. The research data shows that they have no definite plan or strategy to help underachieving learners, and whilst both were aware that the learners were from different socio-economic backgrounds and had different abilities they did not know how to differentiate their teaching methods or strategies to accommodate them. That they did not know how to differentiate within the curriculum, this resulted



in them not knowing how to differentiate in their assessment. Moreover, this impacted negatively on the underachieving learners as well as on the confidence of the practitioners. According to the Department of Social Development and UNICEF (2006, p.66), practitioners must be able to set up and manage a variety of active learning activities that are appropriate to the developmental needs of the child. They should be able to contribute to programme planning and evaluating the assessment of children's progress and administration of the learning programmes. According to the DoE (2005), teachers need an assessment approach and plan that is sufficiently flexible to accommodate a range of learning needs.

From the discussions in section 4.6 the important role that practitioners play in equipping learners was emphasised. It is evident that these practitioners need training in knowledge and skills to accommodate the diverse learning needs of the learners. White Paper 6 (2001, p. 18) states that educators will be developed with the necessary knowledge and skills through structured programmes to put in place successful, integrated educational practices. It is envisaged that this will make a valuable contribution to inclusion.

Another factor impacting negatively on the underachieving Grade R learner is evident from the discussions in section 4.5.1.3 that highlights the importance of the home environment in influencing the way the underachieving Grade R learner performs at school: "Poverty is a primary factor that places children at risk of failure at school" (Van Wyk & Lemmer, 2009, p.160). The high incidence of poverty, violence and crime in the neighbourhood limits the learners' opportunities at home and after school. Fear of crime and use of public transport such as trains and taxis influence parents' and learners' involvement in school activities. The powerful influences of society affect the family in direct and indirect ways. Bronfenbrenner shows from an ecological perspective that one needs to understand the influences of the domestic environment of the learner, to understand why he or she is experiencing challenges that can influence his or her learning.

Micro-systems are the immediate environments in which an individual develops, characterised by those individuals and events closest to one's life, therefore the home as the micro-system should provide appropriate support. That many of these learners come from dysfunctional families has an effect on their academic performance, whilst most parents want a better life for their children and see the teacher as being

responsible for the education of their children. They do not see that their role as more than just getting the child to school, cloth and feed them. Bronfenbrenner claims that the domestic environment is the single most important influence, both positively and negatively, on how well a child does in school.

Results in Chapter Two further state that “Research links poverty among families with hunger, poor nutrition, medical problems, lack of health care and mental health care, developmental delays in children, anxiety, depression, behavioural problems, lowered educational achievement and academic difficulties” (Weaver et al., 2002, as cited in Van Wyk & Lemmer, 2009, p.160). Many of these learners suffer from poor nutrition and often come to school hungry, which impacts on their ability to concentrate and progress in class. Living with grandparents, particularly grandmothers, is common amongst these underachievers, placing a responsibility and strain on both parties and in many cases straining the financial resources.

The poor handwriting on the incomplete forms in the learner profiles is an assumption of illiteracy, hence the inability to assist with homework. A further assumption is that the parents’ style of upbringing is not contributing to the child’s cognitive development.

Because the classrooms are overcrowded with limited classroom space, lack of furniture and resources prevent the practitioners from supporting the learners, and impact on the progress of the underachievers who are often excluded from the teaching and learning process. The practitioners could often not control learners who were disruptive and did not listen or do their work. This can be a result of disruptive families or even child abuse and contribute to poor performance. It can be concluded that the physical and psycho-social environment is not conducive and is a major factor contributing to the academic progress of these learners.

#### **4.7 THEME 4: STRATEGIES GRADE R PRACTITIONERS CURRENTLY USE TO SUPPORT UNDERACHIEVING GRADE R LEARNERS**

##### **4.7.1 Grade R practitioners' responses to in-depth interviews on strategies they currently use to support the underachieving Grade R learners**

Here follows a presentation of results with regard to strategies the participants currently employed to support the underachieving Grade R learners:

*PR A: Okay I can from my side the struggling learners I use sometimes especially the Xhosa uhm the Xhosa learners where I also am Xhosa I have sometimes to use my body language when I'm explaining so that they can when they way I'm explaining they can grip a something because something is also helping them those who are struggling where I then have to colour in I also have to use my body language so that they can get an idea because they can also learn through see more than hearing what I'm saying but when I do the action use my body language maybe they can grasp a something.*

*PR B: I don't have a specific strategy. I help them as part of the class, everyone I help everyone how I help the others I help the children whose got a barrier I help them all together the same way*

It is clear from the above statements that the participants did not have definite strategies to support these underachieving Grade R learners. One mentioned that she used her body and the other one helped them as part of the class. The findings therefore revealed that they found it difficult to address the barriers to learning experienced by the underachieving learners in their classes.

##### **4.7.2 Document analysis on strategies Grade R practitioners currently use to support underachieving Grade R learners**

The majority of the learners presented with fine motor development and weak hand/eye-co-ordination problems. Colouring was untidy and they struggled with letter

formation. The activity in which they had drawn themselves was incomplete and often body parts were placed wrongly on the picture. This was noted on the worksheets that were not filed but kept loosely in boxes. They also copied incorrectly from the board because of poor hand/eye co-ordination. No evidence of intervention strategies could be found in the participants' planning or the learners' worksheets. These **results** strongly confirm the serious need for both practitioners to be trained and skilled to provide the underachieving learners with strategies to address these challenges.

#### **4.7.3 Observations on strategies Grade R practitioners currently use to support underachieving Grade R learners**

Few strategies were used to assist the underachieving learners to fulfil their needs. Participant A practiced some listening skills with the whole class, but only once, whereas Participant B did a jumping activity with the whole class, again only once. The whole class method of teaching was used most of the time and Participant A practiced some listening skills with the whole class, only once. Instructions when learners must do activities at their tables were not explained thoroughly, which resulted in them talking and playing with each other rather than completing the activities.

During a physical education activity, in class, the researcher noted that the learners were challenged with gross motor skills. They were unable to skip, hop or jump in and out the hoops and the practitioner did not know how to assist them. Fine motor challenges, presented in the poor handwriting, poor pencil grip and inability to cut in a straight line were not addressed by the practitioners. The results revealed that they had a serious need to be trained in various strategies to assist the underachieving Grade R learners. Moreover, they had no training in how to adapt their planning or assessment to accommodate the underachieving learners.

#### **Discussion of the theme**

The study found that the teaching of either unqualified practitioner was not up to standard. They were unsure how to support the underachieving Grade R learners, which had a negative impact on their academic progress. As mentioned previously in this chapter, CAPS require all teachers to have a sound understanding of how to

recognise and address barriers to learning and how to plan for diversity. The results revealed that both practitioners were unable to address the learning difficulties experience by the underachieving Grade R learners. The literature study in Chapter Two states that “understanding and addressing these barriers to education is imperative to ensure that the underachieving Grade R learner is effectively supported within the South African education system”. The researcher therefore argues that if this situation prevails, underachievement in the Grade R classes will continue.

#### **4.8 POSSIBLE STRATEGIES TO ASSIST THE UNDERACHIEVING GRADE R LEARNERS**

One of the objectives of the study is to explore possible strategies that could be used to support the underachieving Grade R learners. The following strategies are taken from the CAPS Life Skills Policy document (p.26-27):

##### **4.8.1 Strategies Grade R practitioners can employ to assist underachieving Grade R learners**

###### *Addressing physical development*

###### *(a) Gross motor development*

Physical development is a process that helps the child become physically literate. During this time, he or she develops coordination, movement skills, and abilities. We need to understand that children do not grow and develop in the same way, because development depends on individual traits, the environment, and child rearing practices.

###### **Locomotor:**

- Shuttle running between two markers
- Non- loco motor using senses: proprioception, learners climb through hoops making their bodies “tall, medium and small”.

###### **Perceptual motor:**

- Using sense of touch: blind-folded learners find objects by touching such as beanbags, ball, etc.

**Coordination:**

- Throwing and catching beanbags

**Balance:**

- Balancing on one foot in different games
- Body parts using beanbags: learners copy teacher where to place the beanbag, i.e., while walking place the beanbag on the head, place the beanbag on the knee (L/R) while balancing on one leg.

**Laterality:**

- Activities using the non-dominant side of the body, i.e., turn left/right, use L/R hand, etc.
- Lying on the ground sideways rolling L/R.

**Spatial orientation:**

- Run in different directions using all available space
- Different formations: diamond, square, etc.

**Rhythm:**

- Using music or body percussion, identify body parts and move rhythmically as instructions are given, i.e., touch your nose... touch the head... touch the toes...

**Sports and games:**

- Multi-sensory activities, play in water with various plastic objects
- Throwing bean bags, balls into containers
- Bouncing, catching, throwing

The above activities are recommended to give the underachieving Grade R learners skills to control the large muscles of their bodies. The school needs to provide the necessary resources to stimulate gross motor development. This may consist of jungle gym, hoops, beanbags, balls, skipping ropes and music for dancing.

(b) *Fine motor development*

Fine motor skills are smaller actions, such as grasping an object between the thumb and finger and appropriate handling of tools.

The following strategies are recommended materials to enhance fine motor skills:

- Use play dough to enhance fine motor ability; rolling, pinching, joining, etc.
- Paper cut, tearing, feeling different textures
- Sand pit – writing name, letters, numbers, etc.
- Creative materials: scissors, buttons, etc.
- Water play with small objects
- Trace around own hand with crayon
- Cut simple shapes
- Colouring

Further strategies Grade R practitioners can employ to assist the underachieving Grade R learners:

**Underachieving Grade R learners who:**

c) *remember little/nothing about stories, etc*

- Involve them in discussions that interest them or find books on that area
- Reward learners often
- Use high level of visual and concrete information that can be used in an exploratory way, such as puppets or plays
- Play games for short-term memory

d) *is unable to differentiate between past and present*

- Provide opportunities to play memory games, e.g., putting pictures into the right sequence. Start with two or three pictures and gradually increase according to difficulty
- Activities should be accompanied by the correct vocabulary, e.g., ‘You coloured the picture yesterday and you are playing in the sand today.’
- Use significant events such as birthdays to reinforce the correct use of terms to indicate past and present
- Further vocabulary indicating past and present, like ‘before’ and ‘after’, should be introduced gradually when the learner has made some progress

e) *is clumsy and finding a range of movements difficult*

- Plenty of practice in gross motor and fine motor skills, e.g. get them to hop, skip, jump, run, etc. To improve hand-eye coordination, do puzzles, dot-to-dot, threading, throwing and catching bean bags or balls, etc.
- Physical activities involving large movements with arms crossing the midline of the body in circular movements help
- Outdoor play

f) *only uses single words*

- Modelling of two-or three-word phrases about what you are doing, e.g., ‘Wash your hands’
- Use open questions ‘What is Peter doing?’
- Use familiar rhymes or songs and let the learner completes one that you have started and then move on to ordinary sentences for him/her to complete.
- Use acting out games with large toys and ask him/her what is happening. Command games, e.g., touch your nose, hide and seek and when the toy is found, describe where it is, e.g., ‘under my chair’, ‘on the table’

g) *is shy and withdrawn – avoids eye contact*

- Encourage child to look at your hair/glasses at first
- Use gentle reminders about looking towards the person’s face and do not start to speak until he/she has turned to you.
- Every time if he/she uses eye-contact – acknowledge this in a low-key manner

h) *has behaviour challenges*

- Firm and consistent rules and consequences
- Positive attention – notice when he/she is doing the right thing and tactically ignore the unwanted behaviour
- Approach the psychologist of the Education District Office to assess for possible ADHD



i) *has difficulty with hand-eye coordination*

- There must be a wide range of equipment in the Grade R class in order for the underachieving learners to experience manipulative skills, e.g., musical instruments, paint brushes, pencils, beads, etc.
- Give these learners lots of opportunities to practice manipulative skills
- Provide opportunities to practice gross motor skills and let these learners take part in vigorous exercise before asking them to do something formal
- Hold his/her hand when practising cutting with a scissor
- Short but frequent practice sessions on a particular skill would help

(Glenn, Cousins & Helps, 2006, pp.33-51).

It is important to praise learners when they have made an effort at the things they find challenging.

#### **4.9 CONCLUDING REMARKS**

The purpose of the research was to investigate the needs and challenges of underachieving Grade R learners in a Mitchell's Plain primary school. The data discussed in this chapter confirms that to support the underachieving Grade R learners it is crucial for all systems to work together to meet the needs and address the challenges they encounter. This could be stated based on the data obtained during interviews, observations and document analysis. The needs and challenges of the underachieving Grade R learners must be a priority for the school, education district and home.

Collaborative partnerships should be formed amongst these stakeholders to optimally support the underachieving Grade R learners to ultimately prepare them for Grade 1. The Grade R practitioners are passionate and want to improve their skills and knowledge to support these learners but they are also challenged in the process. They feel frustrated because they are not receiving adequate support from school, DoE, District or parents. Many of the results were similar in the interviews, observations and documents, such as lack of parental support, LoLT, lack of support by the school, lack of resources, poverty and lack of skills and knowledge of practitioners to support these learners. The needs and challenges of underachieving Grade R learners were

discussed in detail in this chapter. The results were consistent across all sets of data collected. The results revealed that the underachieving Grade R learners present with many needs and challenges that impacted greatly on their learning and development, resulting in them underachieving and not being ready for Grade 1.

The final chapter draws a conclusion to the research and makes recommendations.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

#### **5.1 INTRODUCTION**

The underachieving Grade R learners' ability to learn is influenced by many factors; school, home and community. The extent of the needs and challenges they experience clearly reflects the impact on making a solid foundation in Grade R to prepare them for formal school. The different systems as stated by Bronfenbrenner are not working together, clearly showing how situations and actions around the underachieving Grade R learner impact on their development. It is crucial for these systems to work together to fulfil the learning needs of the underachieving Grade R learners.

In this study a qualitative approach was used in order to find out the needs and challenges of underachieving learners in a Mitchell's Plain primary school. In answering the research question, interviews, document analysis and observations were used as methods of data collection.

The following were the objectives of the research:

- To find out the needs of underachieving Grade R learners in a Mitchell's Plain primary school.
- To find out the challenges of underachieving Grade R learners in a Mitchell's Plain primary school.
- To find out the factors contributing to the underachievement of Grade R learners.
- To find out strategies Grade R practitioners currently employ to assist these learners.
- To recommend possible strategies that could be used to support the underachieving Grade R learners.

The findings were consistent across all sets of data collected. The two practitioners could relate their experiences regarding the underachieving Grade R learners, documents were analysed, and practitioners and underachieving Grade R learners observed in their natural setting to further determine reasons for these learners underachieving.

A summary of the research findings are now presented and recommendations will be made based upon the research findings. In addition, recommendations for further research and limitations to the study are provided.

## **5.2 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

When reflecting on the findings it was noted that there were many factors impacting negatively on the underachieving Grade R learners' learning and development. The purpose of the study was to investigate the needs and challenges of underachieving Grade R learners in a Mitchell's Plain primary school. The relevant literature was reviewed in Chapter Two, whilst in Chapter Three the methodology was discussed and in Chapter Four the data was analysed. The findings from the literature review, documents, observations and interviews are addressed according to themes identified from the analysis. As indicated in Chapter One, Grade R lays the foundation blocks for learning Grade 1-3. These learners need to be skilled and developed for future learning in literacy and numeracy. Unfortunately, many experience barriers to learning and development, resulting in underachievement. Early identification of gaps in their learning is therefore crucial. Providing the support implies not only a focus on the learner and his/her needs but also facilitating improvements in their environment, hence the importance of all systems working together to ensure that learners who experience barriers to learning and development are supported.

When analysing the data it was evident that the underachieving Grade R learners presented with diverse learning needs and challenges, but were not receiving the necessary support from the different stakeholders responsible for providing support. From the interviews with the Grade R practitioners it was established that neither had formal educational training, which impacted greatly on the learning and development of these learners. Because they were not trained they were not responsive to the needs of the learners and therefore unable to provide the necessary support. They were however aware that the learners had different abilities, but unsure as how to differentiate their teaching and assessment methods or devise strategies to address them. Moreover, they themselves faced many challenges and obstacles when trying to support these underachieving Grade R learners.

The analysis of the findings clearly indicated that without the commitment and support of the school and parents, the practitioners found it difficult to help the learners, which resulted in a situation whereby they would not be ready for Grade 1. They need the school, education district office and parents to support them but learners and practitioners struggled with effective communication and social interaction. It was found that language was a huge barrier to learners, practitioners and parents, contributing to the underachievement. Difficulty with language was highlighted across the themes as one of the major contributory factors for underachievement. The findings revealed that neither the learners nor practitioners had the language skills for the interchange of instruction in English, as their own language was different from the LoLT of the school. The physical learning environment as well as the psychosocial learning environment is also affecting the learners' ability to perform effectively. They had a great need for physical and material resources, which were in short supply. It was also found that these learners displayed perceptual, motor and memory disorders. These were serious challenges that impacted on their learning and development, therefore they displayed the need to be supported with strategies.

It was evident that socio-economic circumstances had a significant impact on the needs and challenges of the learners. Most of the underachieving Grade R learners were from disadvantaged backgrounds and were exposed to high levels of poverty, having serious implications for their learning and development. The lack of parental involvement impacts negatively on the development and freedom of the underachieving learner to explore. The parents were not interested in a partnership with the school and viewed the education of their children as the responsibility of the school. The school and District should play a significant role in preparing these learners for school, however the findings revealed that the underachieving Grade R learners were even further held back and their needs and challenges were not seen as a priority.

The next section provides a brief summary of the research questions investigated and makes recommendations. It is important to note that the themes are closely interrelated and that the findings from the interviews, document analysis and observations could be related to more than one theme. The next section also provides a summary of the answers to the research questions.

### **5.2.1 Findings on the needs of the underachieving Grade R learners**

White Paper 5 refers to the growing appreciation that children's needs and indivisible rights span the areas of health, nutrition, a safe environment, psychosocial and cognitive development. The findings are that the underachieving Grade R learners are faced with many of these needs which contribute to their academic delay. When analysing the findings it was noted that the physical and psycho-social learning environment was not conducive to teaching and learning. These learners need to be developed physically, cognitively, socially and emotionally. The policy of the DBE (2001) highlights resources as a crucial factor in ensuring the physical environment is conducive to learning. The need for physical development of the Grade R learner is therefore critical in building a solid foundation. A serious lack of resources was identified in the findings. The Grade R underachieving learners present themselves with motor development as well as perceptual difficulties. The lack of resources therefore results in them not being supported to address these needs which are crucial for the development of coordination, movement and cognitive abilities through process.

The findings revealed a serious lack of resources which impacts on the developmental stage of these learners, preventing them from building a solid foundation for formal schooling. It is therefore difficult for the Grade R practitioners to create a learning environment that is nurturing and supportive where the needs of these learners can be addressed.

Because many of these learners are exposed to a wide range of problems, such as poverty and low income, difficult family circumstances, violent and crime related neighbourhoods, they misbehave and cause discipline challenges in the classroom. Some of them are shy and withdrawn, with behaviour that impacts on the psychosocial learning environment and while intangible negatively affects learning. The problem is compounded by lack of classroom structure. The Grade R practitioners should teach the underachieving Grade R learners' skills that will enable them to form caring relationships, employ self-control, pay attention and follow instructions. The findings however revealed that they were not knowledgeable and lacked the ability to identify the needs of learners. They struggled to support them with strategies to address the different needs and lacked the skills to educate and develop them.

The findings further revealed that some of these learners arrived at school hungry and without food. The physiological needs are the most prominent of all needs as a hungry child has no interest in learning. As mentioned in Chapter Two, many poor learners benefit from the National School Nutrition Programme of the WCED, which provides them with meals from the schools feeding scheme.

The literature in Chapter Two emphasizes the importance of parental involvement and family support in the education of the learner. Many South Africans live in poverty created by factors such as inadequate education, low wages, unemployment, and malnutrition, an opportunity-deprived existence, technological backwardness, overpopulation, disadvantageous surroundings, conflict, violence, crime, substance abuse and psychological degradation (Landsberg, 2005). All the factors mentioned above prevent parental participation in the learning process. However for these learners to be successful it is important that parents become involved in the education of their children. In this study, lack of involvement by the parents and caregivers had an impact on the performance and confidence of the learners in the classroom, resulting in them underachieving.

**Considering the findings above, the following recommendations are made:**

- For the lack of parental involvement it is recommended that the Grade R programme and expectations be discussed with parents/caregivers at the beginning of the year. Lines of communication should be created between practitioner and parent.
- The leadership at the school integrates all types of families into the school and classroom programme to increase the academic performance of the underachieving learners. With different initiatives from the school, parent involvement can be improved. Examples of activities can include language translators to assist parents where needed, recruit and organize parent volunteers, provide parents with strategies to assist learners at home, hold informal information sessions about child growth and development, motivation and the process of language development. The school however needs to recognize that there are many aspects of modern life impacting on effective parent involvement, especially those from poor socio-economic communities.

- The school should develop a homework policy and explain to parents how to monitor and support homework.
- Involve parents with practitioners to develop relevant material for the use in the classroom and at home.
- Form a parent support group (include District Psychologist, Social worker and Learning Support Advisor) where parents can share their difficulties in coping with children experience barriers to learning at home.
- To address a) physical need for resources, the researcher recommends that the school use the subsidized money (R4,800 per learner per annum) to provide adequate and appropriate resources to support the needs and challenges of the underachieving learners. It can approach the District office and local agencies for additional resources. b) For psycho-social needs, the researcher recommends that the practitioners create a positive, structured learning environment. It is crucial that they interact productively with all learners to promote learning, practice regular verbal and behavioural reinforcement, guard against learners feeling bored and uninterested, and speak personally with the underachieving learners as often as possible. They should create the desired environment by having a ready willingness to help underachieving learners.
- It is further recommended that Grade R practitioners be empowered through training and workshops to address the diverse learning needs of the underachieving Grade R learners.

### **5.2.2 Findings on challenges of underachieving Grade R learners**

The LoLT is a major challenge for the underachieving Grade R learners, because the language of the school is their second language. Added to this, the school's language is also the second language of the practitioners. The learners are unable to understand what is being taught as well as to communicate effectively in the LoLT and therefore cannot attend to the language needs of those learners who pose a huge challenge. The underachieving Grade R learners find it difficult to understand the practitioners' instructions, thus excluding them from the teaching and learning process and resulting in them lagging further behind.



The literacy findings in Chapter Two state that practitioners working with children require knowledge of the processes involved in children's learning so that they can support, develop and scaffold the children's development. They need to be knowledgeable and skilled in setting up and managing a variety of learning activities that are appropriate to the developmental needs of these children. The findings revealed that the Grade R underachieving learners are challenged by the Grade R practitioners' lack the knowledge and skills to support them.

From the analysis findings in Chapter Three, it was pointed out that the SMT of the school and education District was expected to support and capacitate the Grade R practitioners in order for them to support and develop the underachieving Grade R learners. The study found that these role players were failing in their responsibilities towards both learners and practitioners.

Lack of parental or caregiver involvement was again emphasized as amongst the challenges experience by the underachieving Grade R learner. The literature in Chapter Two indicated that parental involvement has a positive effect on the child's success in school and interactions with and support of their child can enhance the learning process. Parents of these underachieving Grade R learners should be involved in collaborative processes of support from the outset. All the above mentioned challenges contribute to these Grade R learners' underachievement.

### **Recommendations:**

- The school should strongly emphasise their language policy to the parents when they register learners.
- Small groups of parents can be mobilised to act as volunteers to assist in the Grade R classrooms. This will hopefully address some of the language challenges as well as the lack of parental involvement.
- Practitioners should be skilled in basic knowledge of how to support learners who have not acquired the ability to use and understand English.
- Learners must be given opportunities to interact and use the English language to interact, for example, in role play, storytelling, or exposure to vocabulary.
- Practitioners must be work-shopped in strategies on how to identify and address barriers to learning and development. This should provide them with

knowledge and skills to support the needs and challenges of the underachieving learners.

- Parents of these underachieving Grade R learners should be involved in collaborative processes of support from the outset.

### **5.2.3 Findings on factors contributing to the underachievement of Grade R learners**

The Grade R practitioners play a pivotal role in both teacher guided activities and purposeful play. Research findings have shown that both practitioners decry their lack in training. They do not implement appropriate teaching or assessment strategies because they lack the knowledge and skills, which results in them not being able to attend to the individual learners with diverse learning needs. They therefore lack confidence when presenting their lessons. Furthermore, they struggle to be innovative and creative. According to the DBE (2011), teachers need to be responsive to the diverse learning needs of learners and provide the necessary support to avoid barriers to learning. Because they do not have sufficient knowledge or experience and are unqualified to teach in Grade R they fail to develop and support these learners. They have a limited understanding of high quality practice. Both lack sufficient insight and understanding of appropriate practice. Findings revealed that they have no formal educational training for educating or developing these learners, thus requiring a formal qualification is of utmost importance. White Paper 5 (2011) makes provision in the strategic plan for practitioner career-pathing and development.

Furthermore, their understanding of planning and assessment for these learners are limited or non-existent. Planning does not cover the diverse needs of these underachieving learners. Their inability to plan often results in not enough content being taught on a day. Differentiated planning as well as differentiated assessment is not carried out. Because there is no flexible assessment plan to accommodate the diverse learning needs, the underachieving Grade R learners are unable to demonstrate what they know. Practitioners also display minimal understanding of how meaningful play can be implemented to enhance learning both inside and outside the classroom. The researcher argues that if they were qualified and had the necessary skills they would be able to observe underachieving learners to identify their needs and plan accordingly. This has major implications as it impacts on learner

achievement. They also said that they did not know how to support the underachieving learners, and that they were not CAPS trained also contributed to the young ones being disadvantaged in their learning. Because they lacked the basic fundamentals and skills to teach the young ones they failed to offer the learners in their classroom a balanced programme of experience.

From the findings in Chapter Three it was pointed out that the SMT of the school and District was expected to support and capacitate the Grade R practitioners in order for them to support and develop the underachieving Grade R learners. There was no monitoring or evaluation for the Grade R practitioners, which creates a problem for them as they are not sure whether they are doing the right thing in teaching, or providing support for the underachieving learners. The study found that these role-players were all failing in their responsibilities towards the learners and practitioners.

As mentioned in Chapter Two, learners from poor socio-economic circumstances are more vulnerable to academic failure. Because many of the underachieving learners come from broken households with parents who are not interested in their children's learning, underachieving is common amongst Grade R learners. That some of these learners live with grandparents who often lack the energy to put in place disciplinary structures they cannot help their grandchildren with homework or monitor school progress, also contributing to underachievement.

The environmental factors that these underachieving learners are exposed to on a daily basis have an impact on the development of these young ones. The role models in their communities are gangsters and criminals with little or no education. Proper norms and values are therefore not taught to these young children. These factors impact greatly on the underachieving Grade R learners and it is clear that an holistic intervention is needed to fix these challenges. The researcher recognizes that it is difficult for the practitioners alone to make a significant difference to these challenges.

Home language is crucial when it comes to communication. The home language being different from the LoLT is another factor contributing to the Grade R learners underachieving. These underachieving learners are forced to communicate and learn in the language they do not use at home, making it difficult not only for the learners but also for the practitioners, as both communicate in their second language. It is

critical for the school and practitioners to consider these factors when trying to meet the learning needs of the underachieving Grade R learners. In the light of the findings on factors impacting on the learning and development of the underachieving Grade R learners, the following recommendations are made:

**Recommendations:**

- Grade R practitioners need to be trained and empowered to be able to provide quality Grade R education, particularly to the underachieving learners.
- The school should arrange training for the Grade R practitioners in CAPS as soon as possible.
- Practitioners must be work-shopped in strategies on how to identify and address barriers to learning and development. This should provide them with knowledge and skills to support the needs and challenges of the underachieving learners.
- Practitioners should improve their qualifications through further study.
- The practitioners should follow the daily programme according to the timetable. It must be structured as the learners enjoy feelings of security from knowing what is expected each day. The timetable must be well planned yet not rigid. The practitioner may adapt it according to the needs of the learners.
- Practitioners need to offer children a balanced programme of experiences. They need to be adaptable and respond to the individual needs of the underachieving learners.
  - The Foundation Phase HoD should guide, support and monitor the practitioners continuously, to ensure they are doing what is expected.
  - It is crucial that they be included as part of the Education District support and monitoring programme.
- The school must use the subsidized money (R4 800 per learner per annum) to provide adequate and appropriate resources to support the needs and challenges of the underachieving learners.

- The school must ensure that the educator-learner ratio be small enough to accommodate positive interactions. This will enable the underachiever to get individual instruction and personal feedback about the barriers to learning experienced.
- Teacher assistants could be employed to assist practitioners with the underachieving learners by giving them individual attention. Learners could also be grouped for activities or even taken for outside for activities.
- Recruit parent volunteers to assist with routine tasks.
- Ask the WCED to build suitable Grade R classrooms where optimal teaching and learning can take place.
- In this multicultural school, teachers are required to work with learners with diverse cultural backgrounds, different languages and communication styles. It is difficult for the practitioners and learners to communicate effectively. The school should therefore strongly emphasize their language policy to the parents when they register the learners.
- The needs and challenges of the underachieving Grade R learners should be a priority for the school, home and Education District. Collaborative partnerships should be formed.

#### **5.2.4 Findings on strategies Grade R practitioners use to assist underachieving Grade R learners**

Part of the research study was to ascertain what strategies the Grade R practitioners are employing to assist the underachieving Grade R learners. It became evident that neither participant had definite strategies to address learning difficulties experienced by the Grade R underachievers. According to the DoE (2001), it is imperative to ensure differentiation in curriculum delivery to enable access to learning for all learners. The findings revealed that the practitioners lacked the ability to devise r employ strategies to ensure that these underachieving Grade R learners were engaged in meaningful activities. Neither understood how these underachieving learners learned or how to address their needs. They did however mention that they needed guidance, support and training to assist them.

## **Recommendations**

- Practitioners must be work-shopped in strategies on how to identify and address barriers to learning and development. This should provide them with knowledge and skills to support the needs and challenges of the underachieving learners.
- It is also suggested that it would be beneficial to them if the SMT can tap into the expertise of the Grade 1 educators as a human resource, to more specifically demonstrate to the practitioners how to do differentiated instruction. More opportunities will then be created for group and individualised support.

### **5.3 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

The following recommendations are made based on the reflections during the process of this study and the findings.

#### **5.3.1 Formal training programmes for Grade R practitioners**

Further research should be conducted regarding the inclusion in Grade R practitioner training programmes of the identification and support of barriers to learning. The researcher recommends compulsory barriers to learning modules with in-depth and enriched content on how to address these barriers.

#### **5.3.2 Collaboration between stakeholders**

Explore collaboration of all stakeholders in support of underachieving learners.

#### **5.3.3 Psycho-social and physical learning environment**

Explore the importance of creating a psycho social and physical learning environment

#### **5.4 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

The following limitations were anticipated and considered in the study:

- The study involved only the two Grade R classes and not the parents, principal or Foundation Phase HoD, and therefore the findings might not be a true reflection.
- It would have been beneficial to the study if the Grade 1 educators could have been interviewed on their perceptions of why these learners underachieved.
- Future research could include Grade R ECD practitioners from more schools.
- As a District Official of the WCED, and familiar with the school, my experiences and perceptions might have had an influence on the process of data collection and analysis.

## **5.5 FINAL REMARKS**

In conclusion, the objectives of the study were met and research questions answered. The researcher recognises from the results that the underachieving Grade R learners in a Mitchell's Plain school have numerous needs and challenges causing academic underachievement. The fact that these learners come from challenging socio-economic circumstances with a lack of parental involvement contribute to underachievement.

The data analysis clearly indicated that the Grade R practitioners need to be qualified and receive structured training to empower them with strategies and skills to support the needs and challenges of these underachieving Grade R learners.

Furthermore, that collaboration between the parents, school and Education District is crucial to prevent underachievement. The practitioners identified the ignorance of these stakeholders regarding the needs and challenges of the underachieving Grade R learners and more specifically to them as practitioners as part of the contributing factors.

If inclusive education is to succeed, supporting the needs and challenges of the underachieving Grade R learners is crucial. The focus should be on planned action from all stakeholders to address the needs and challenges and not leave the underachieving Grade R learners and practitioners to find their own way.



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## **APPENDICES**

APPENDIX A	Letter requesting participation in the study
APPENDIX B	Consent Form (Participant)
APPENDIX C	Assent Letter (Grade R learner)
APPENDIX D	Letter requesting permission to conduct research:
APPENDIX E	Consent form
APPENDIX F	Interview schedule
APPENDIX G	Observation schedule

### OTHER

UNISA Research Ethics Certificate

WCED Letter of permission to conduct research in school

Language Editing Certificate

**APPENDIX A**

**LETTER TO PARTICIPANT (Practitioner)**

Dear .....

My name is Beranese Filander and I am doing a research with Mr A.A Mdikana, senior in the Department of Education, towards an M Ed at the University of South Africa. I am inviting you to be a participant in a study entitled “Investigating the needs and challenges of underachieving Grade R learners in a Mitchell’s Plain primary school”. The aim of the study is to investigate the needs and challenges of underachieving Grade R learners in a Mitchell’s Plain primary school. I am conducting the research to find out:

1. the factors that are responsible for the Grade R learners underachieving.
2. what strategies the Grade R practitioners currently employ to assist these learners
3. possible strategies that could be used as support to these learners

If you agree to be involved as a participant of my research, then you will be required to sign the attached Informed Consent Form that highlights the aspects of your participation that you need to be aware of before consenting to be interviewed.

Only my supervisor will be provided with access to any of the information obtained during the interview.

Yours sincerely,

.....

Beranese Filander  
18 Klip Springer Street  
Soneike  
Kuils River  
7580

Tel 021 900 7089; cell 083 284 2000/082 511 3116

Supervisor:

Mr A. A Mdikana

PO Box 392, UNISA, 0003

tel 012 429 8212 ; cell 0762756116

**APPENDIX B**

**DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION  
Master of Education in Inclusive Education  
Dissertation**

**AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA**

**RESEARCHER: Beranese Filander 3617 547 1**

**TITLE: Investigating the needs and challenges of underachieving Grade R learners in a Mitchell's Plain primary school**

**INFORMED CONSENT FORM (Participant – practitioner)**

I, ..... (name and surname), understand that I am being asked to participate in the above research study and that:

1. This research study is aimed at describing my experience of needs and challenges of underachieving Grade R learners at a Mitchell's Plain primary school;
2. If I agree to participate in the study, I will be involved in an interview process with the researcher who will ask me a set of questions and the interview will be recorded. I may ask the researcher to turn the *Dictaphone* off while I am answering questions, if I do not want my answers recorded;
3. The expected duration of my participation will be approximately three one hour sessions;
4. There will be other participants in the research study;
5. I was selected as a participant because of my experience being a Grade R practitioner;
6. I am aware of the benefits of this research study and will not be receiving any reimbursement for my participation in the research;
7. My identity will remain anonymous and I will be given a code name by the researcher;
8. As my identity will remain anonymous, there are no foreseeable risks or discomforts in my participation;
9. My participation in this study is entirely voluntary, that I may withdraw from this study at any time should I wish to do so;
10. The study has been explained to me. I have read and understood the consent form, all my questions have been answered and I agree to participate. I understand that I will be given findings should I be interested to know about the outcome;
11. I am free to ask any questions about the study or about being a participant and I may contact Beranese Filander (Master's Student) at (021) 900 7089 / 083 284 2000;
12. The University of South Africa has given guidance and ethics approval to this research.

SIGNED AT MITCHELL'S PLAIN ON THIS      DAY OF      2015

Full name of participant: .....

Signature of participant: .....

## APPENDIX C

### Assent letter

**Project Title:** Investigating the needs and challenges of underachieving Grade R learners in a Mitchell's Plain primary school

**Principal Investigator:** Beranese Filander

I want to tell you about a research study I am doing. A research study is a way to learn more about something. I would like to find out more about how children like you learn in your class and also how you play outside on the playground. I can then help you and other children at other schools do better at school. You are being asked to join the study because you are a Grade R learner at this school and I believe that you will be able to help me.

If you want to help me in this study, I will come to your class for two weeks to watch you learn and play. I promise you that nothing bad will happen to you while I am watching you. I will also look at your books I can even learn more.

This study will help us learn more about how to help other learners just like you learn and work even better at school.

You can say "yes" or you can say "no" to be part of the study. It is up to you. You can say "yes" now and change your mind later. All you have to do is tell me. No one will be mad at you if you don't want to be in the study anymore.

Before you say **yes** or **no** to being in this study, I will answer any questions you have.

If you have any questions about this study please feel free to contact me, Ms. Beranese Filander at 083284 2000.

Yes, I will be in this research study.

No, I don't want to do this.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Child's name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Person obtaining Assent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**APPENDIX D**

**(Principal)**

**DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION**

**Master of Education in Inclusive Education**

**Dissertation**

**AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA**

**RESEARCHER: Beranese Filander 3617 547 1**

**TITLE: Investigating the needs and challenges of underachieving Grade R learners in a Mitchell's Plain primary school**

**Request for permission to conduct research at \_\_\_\_\_ school January- May 2015**

**“Investigating the needs and challenges of underachieving Grade R learners in a Mitchell's Plain primary school”**

**Beranese Filander**

**Western Cape Education Department**

**083 284 2000**

**[Beranese.Filander@westerncape.gov.za](mailto:Beranese.Filander@westerncape.gov.za)**

Dear Principal

I, Beranese Filander am doing a research with Mr A.A. Mdikana, a lecturer/senior in the Department of Inclusive Education towards an M Ed at the University of South Africa furthering my studies in Inclusive Education. The aim of my study is to investigate the needs and challenges of underachieving Grade R learners at your school.

Your institution has been selected because of the huge developmental gaps identified during a Grade R pilot study conducted by the Western Cape Education Department.

I am planning to obtain the necessary information for this research project through the use of interviews, observations and document analysis.

Participants in the study will be the two Grade R practitioners. Twenty underachieving Grade R learners will be observed in their natural learning environment. The two practitioners will be interviewed for not more than one hour after teaching time. The interview will be audio taped with the consent of the participants. There are no foreseeable risks to the practitioners or learners that will be participating in this study.

Please note that your identity, all identifying information of the school, the names of the practitioners as well as their responses will be kept strictly confidential and will remain anonymous. I also assure you that I will not disturb the normal school routine with this project or cause any financial implications for the school.

Feedback on research findings will be made available to the school and Western Cape Education Department.

With sincere appreciation for your co-operation

Yours sincerely

\_\_\_\_\_

B. Filander (021 900 7089/ 083 284 2000)

**Postgraduate student**

---

Please complete the following in order to grant permission to the Grade R practitioners of your school to participate in research project:

I, \_\_\_\_\_ hereby give my informed consent that the Grade R practitioners of my school are permitted to participate in the above-mentioned research project.

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

## **APPENDIX E**

**Title of study: “Investigating the needs and challenges of underachieving Grade R learners in a Mitchell’s Plain primary school”**

**Dear Parent**

Your child .....is invited to participate in a study entitled, “Investigating the needs and challenges of at risk learners in a Mitchell’s Plain primary school”. I am undertaking this study as part of my Masters research at the University of South Africa. The purpose of the study is find out the factors that are responsible for the Grade R learners underachieving and the possible benefits of the study are to provide strategies and recommendations in support of these learners to prepare them for formal schooling. I expect to have 19 other children participating in the study.

If you allow your child to participate, he/she will be observed during regular teaching and learning activities inside as well as outside the classroom. I will also be looking at his/her class work books.

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and can be identified with your child will remain confidential and will only be disclosed with your permission. His or her name or your name or the name of the school will not be linked in any written or verbal report based on this study. Such a report will be used for research purposes only.

There are no foreseeable risks to your child by participating in the study. Your child will receive no direct benefit from participating in the study; however, the possible benefits to education are to identify the problems as early as possible and support these learners to prepare them for formal schooling. Neither your child nor you will receive any type of payment for participating in this study.

Your child’s participation in this study is voluntary. Your child may decline to participate or to withdraw from participation at any time. Withdrawal or refusal to participate will not affect him/her in any way. Similarly you can agree to allow your child to be in the study now and change your mind later without any penalty.



The study will take place during regular classroom activities with the prior approval of the school and your child's teacher.

The information gathered from the study and your child's participation in the study will be stored securely on a password locked computer in my locked office for five years after the study. Thereafter, records will be erased.

If you have any questions about the study please ask me or my study supervisor, Mr A.A. Mdikana (012 429 8212), Department of Inclusive Education, College of Education, University of South Africa. My contact number is 083 284 2000 and my email is [Beranese.Filander@westerncape.gov.za](mailto:Beranese.Filander@westerncape.gov.za) The email of my supervisor is [mdikaaa@unisa.ac.za](mailto:mdikaaa@unisa.ac.za). Permission has already been given by the Western Cape Education Department and the Ethics Committee of the College of Education, UNISA.

You are making a decision about allowing your child to be observed in this study. Your signature below indicates you have read the information provided above and have decided to allow him or her to participate in the study. You may keep a copy of this letter.

Name of child (print)

.....

Name of parent/guardian (print)

.....

Date: .....

Beranese Filander

Signature:.....

Date: .....

**APPENDIX F**

**DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION  
Master of Education in Inclusive Education  
Dissertation  
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA  
RESEARCHER: Beranese Filander 3617 547 1**

**TITLE: Investigating the needs and challenges of underachieving Grade R learners in a Mitchell's Plain primary school**

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**GENERAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

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1. Please state your qualifications and years of service/experience as a Grade R practitioner.
2. What does the word underachievement mean?
3. Please describe the term learning difficulties/ barriers to learning?
4. What in your opinion are the challenges faced by these underachieving Grade R learners in your class?
5. Have you had any training in supporting these underachieving learners?
6. What in your opinion are the needs of these underachieving learners?
7. The LOLT of the school is English. Please explain how do you deal with language barriers in your class?
8. What challenges do you face in your school regarding support to these underachieving learners?
9. How do you propose to deal with it?
10. What factors do you think are responsible for these learners experiencing barriers to learning and development?
11. What strategies do you use to assist these struggling learners?

12. How do you: a) plan  
b) assess the underachieving learners in your class?
- 13 How does the Senior Management Team of the school support you to support these learners?
- 14 Please comment on the parental support of the underachieving learners in your class.
- 15 Is there anything that was not asked, but you want the researcher to know

**APPENDIX G****OBSERVATION SCHEDULE**

PARTICIPANT:

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

What observed	Detailed descriptions	Reflective notes
Learning environment		
Daily timetable/schedule		
Teaching methods		
Social interaction		
Language and communication		
Planning		

Assessment		
Workbooks, Learner Profiles, Assessments		

Adapted from Drew, Hardman and Hosp, (2008, p.199).

## Research Ethics Clearance Certificate

This is to certify that the application for ethical clearance submitted by

**B Filander [36175471]**

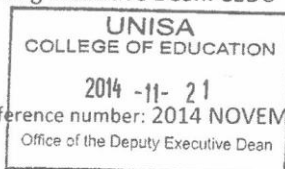
for a MEd study entitled

**Investigating the needs and challenges of underachieving Grade R learners in a  
Mitchell's Plain primary school**

has met the ethical requirements as specified by the University of South Africa  
College of Education Research Ethics Committee. This certificate is valid for two  
years from the date of issue.



Prof VI McKay  
Acting Executive Dean: CEDU



Dr M Claassens  
CEDU REC (Chairperson)  
[mcdtc@netactive.co.za](mailto:mcdtc@netactive.co.za)

17 NOVEMBER 2014



**REFERENCE:** 20131107-20079

**ENQUIRIES:** Dr A T Wyngaard

Ms Beranese Filander  
18 Klip Springer Street  
Soneike  
Kuilis River  
7580

**Dear Ms Beranese Filander**

**RESEARCH PROPOSAL: INVESTIGATING THE NEEDS AND CHALLENGES OF UNDERCHIEVING GRADE R LEARNERS IN A MITCHELL'E PLAIN PRIMARY SCHOOL**

Your application to conduct the above-mentioned research in schools in the Western Cape has been approved subject to the following conditions:

1. Principals, educators and learners are under no obligation to assist you in your investigation.
2. Principals, educators, learners and schools should not be identifiable in any way from the results of the investigation.
3. You make all the arrangements concerning your investigation.
4. Educators' programmes are not to be interrupted.
5. The Study is to be conducted from **15 January 2015 till 30 June 2015**
6. No research can be conducted during the fourth term as schools are preparing and finalizing syllabi for examinations (October to December).
7. Should you wish to extend the period of your survey, please contact Dr A.T Wyngaard at the contact numbers above quoting the reference number?
8. A photocopy of this letter is submitted to the principal where the intended research is to be conducted.
9. Your research will be limited to the list of schools as forwarded to the Western Cape Education Department.
10. A brief summary of the content, findings and recommendations is provided to the Director: Research Services.
11. The Department receives a copy of the completed report/dissertation/thesis addressed to:

**The Director: Research Services  
Western Cape Education Department  
Private Bag X9114  
CAPE TOWN  
8000**

We wish you success in your research.

Kind regards.

Signed: Dr Audrey T Wyngaard

**Directorate: Research**

**DATE: 10 October 2014**

# Acknowledgment of Language Editing

Date: Saturday, 07 November 2015

This is to certify that I have conducted Language Editing on the following  
dissertation:

**INVESTIGATING THE NEEDS AND CHALLENGES OF  
UNDERACHIEVING GRADE R LEARNERS IN A MITCHELL'S PLAIN  
PRIMARY SCHOOL**

by

**BERANESE FILANDER**

Algraham

Andrew Graham (BA, MA dist., PhD, University of Keele, UK)\*



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**Email:** [happy4andrew@hotmail.com](mailto:happy4andrew@hotmail.com)

\*Former Tutor in Postgraduate Writing Centre and Managing Editor of ISI Accredited Journal