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SNAPSHOT: GRADE R TEACHER IDENTITY IN POLICY

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ABSTRACT

This snapshot briefly discusses the importance of understanding Grade R teacher identity, and focuses on the process of selecting and analyzing three key government documents, in order to bring to the fore officially prescribed roles and identities for these teachers.

INTRODUCTION

This snapshot aims to highlight the significance of researching teacher learning as theorized by identity, in particular the changing identities of Grade R teachers through their

participation in a Numeracy Community of Practice. Using identity as a lens to understand teacher learning benefits our understanding of, and informs our responses to, South Africa's current educational 'crisis' (Fleisch, 2008). A focus on Grade R teachers' identity, in particular, contributes to a currently under-researched field of Early Childhood Development (ECD). Although internationally, and more recently, in South Africa, both researchers and government (official) stakeholders have turned their attention to the importance of providing quality Grade R education to all (Harley, et.al, 2000; Atweh, et.al, 2014), little is known about Grade R teachers, who they are, how they learn, and where they are situated in the broader educational landscape.

LITERATURE REVIEW: GRADE R AND IDENTITY

A focus on ECD and Grade R indicates a shift from the historical practice of focusing on learners in the Further Education and Training (FET) Phase of schooling, in preparation for the National Senior Certificate exams (commonly referred to as Matric). It is becoming increasingly noted that Grade 12 is too late, as "the education achievement gap begins in the Foundation Phase and continues unbroken" (Fleisch, 2008, p. 30). Numerous research also supports that the earlier the intervention, the less likely children are to face challenges later on (Wright, et.al, 2000)

It is in light of the critical importance of quality teaching and learning in the Foundation Phase, that my larger study has chosen Grade R teachers' practice spaces as the empirical field. The importance of the early years on children's cognitive, emotional, language and social development is well-known (Atweh, et.al, 2014).

There exists a gap in insights into the implications for pre-school teacher learning and changing identity, and this could be as a result of Grade R only recently becoming an official part of the educational landscape.

Internationally and nationally, educational research has begun making in-roads in to understanding 'who' the teacher is and what influence this has on the quality of the teacher's teaching, the learners' learning, as well as (significantly), on the teachers' learning (e.g. Graven, 2004; Lerman, 2000). Work in this field, particularly as it relates to identity, "recognises the teacher as central to understanding what happens in mathematics classrooms" (Westaway, 2017, p. 11).

METHODOLOGY

The focus here is on the official or 'prescribed by policy' Grade R teacher identity that has emerged over the last few years. For analysis, I draw on Wenger's (1998) 'dimensions of organizational design' (p. 242-249), and focus particularly on the following two aspects:

- Participation and reification: challenges of institutionalisation (p. 243-244)
- The designed and the emergent: organisations as dual structures (p. 244-246)

This will be done in order to understand the role propagated by policy as well as the one adopted in practice. The documents mentioned below will provide the main source for the documentary analysis, as utilizing a qualitative process, I seek to collate and discuss the various officially promoted roles and responsibilities for Grade R teachers.

- In order to understand ‘who’ the teacher is expected to be in the classroom landscape, I look to the Curriculum and Policy Assessment Statements (the national South African Curriculum). In particular, Section 2.8 Grade R (DBE, 2012, pp. 14-17), as it deals with the type of teaching and learning advocated in the Grade R classroom.

- In order to understand ‘who’ the teacher is expected to be in the professional teacher landscape (her position amongst other teachers), I look to the specifications outlined by a governmentally-approved Grade R Diploma qualification, namely the Diploma in Grade R Teaching offered by Lyceum College (SAQA, n.d.)

- And finally, to understand ‘who’ the teacher is expected to be in the broader educational landscape, and in particular, her role in the national drive to address the educational ‘crisis’ and provide quality teaching to all South Africa’s children, I look to the Action Plan 2014 (DBE, 2011).

I will analyse these three documents in order to better understand the official ‘who’ currently prescribed to Grade R teachers. At conference, a deeper discussion around the importance of researching Grade R teacher identity, a summary of the documentary analysis, as well as preliminary discussions around the ‘officially designated who’ versus the ‘who I am in the everyday’ will be presented.

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