Professional development for reception year teachers in an ODL developing context

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Abstract
This article reports on an investigation into the viability of a Foundation Phase (Grade R-3) programme delivered via distance learning for the professional development of Reception Year (Grade R) teachers in South African rural communities. The investigation was based on the premise that core components of effective distance learning programmes identified in the literature should be tailor-made to fit the profile of the Reception Year Open Distance Learning (ODL) teacher-student, if Reception Year teaching competencies are to form part of the programme aim. A survey conducted amongst 98 Grade R-3 teacher-students enrolled for a Foundation Phase Advanced Certificate in Education programme and another administered to thirteen facilitators of the programme revealed practical significant discrepancies between the level of importance of the core components as reported by the facilitators, and the extent to which the programme measured up to their expectations. Recommendations are made to improve Reception Year teaching competencies as an outcome of an ODL programme in a developing context.

BACKGROUND
The South African Department of Education substantiated its commitment to the early childhood development (ECD) initiative by prioritising the implementation
of the Reception Year (Grade R) as part of compulsory schooling (South African Department of Education 2010, 18). Underqualified and unqualified early childhood development teachers, especially those responsible for Grade R, are encouraged to attain specialised accredited qualifications. In order to realise the vision of the Department to provide good quality school-readiness programmes for all five to six year old pupils in their mother tongue by 2014 (South African Government 2011, 11, 17), it is imperative to train a large number of teachers, especially African language speakers, as professional Grade R teachers.

Recognising the direct need for an accredited Grade R teacher qualification, higher education institutions are currently designing Grade R teacher qualifications, of which some will be delivered via distance learning (South African Department of Education 2010, 24). Large geographical distances and socio-economic barriers often make distance learning programmes the only feasible option for Reception Year teachers in poor rural areas to attain accredited qualifications according to the standards of the Department of Education. Current distance learning programmes need to be scrutinised to address deficiencies which may hamper the realisation of the government’s ECD initiative.

**OPEN DISTANCE LEARNING FOR THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF ECD TEACHERS – AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE**

Kanuka and Conrad (2003, 386) define distance learning (DL) as the educational phenomenon where instructors are in some way removed from students while open distance learning (ODL) is viewed as a more flexible, learner-centred approach to DL where the students may choose when, where, how and at what pace they want to learn.

Criteria set for DL programmes by South Africa’s National Plan for Higher Education (Ministry of Education 2001, 53), focus on the compatibility of a programme with the institution’s mission, its institutional capacity, whether it addresses regional and/or national needs, and whether it meets the quality assurance criteria of the HEQC. Upko (2006, 253) advocates a more learner-centred focus by institutions that implement DL by providing students with assistance to achieve their desired outcomes in a distance education environment. This statement is crucial to the fundamental argument of this article, namely that analysis of the student profile is imperative to ensure that the needs of a student population are accommodated in the design of a DL programme if programme outcomes are to be guaranteed. Although DL requires independent learning by students (Anderson 2007), the critical role of student support in a DL programme
is incontestable. While previous research (Tait 2003; Naidu 2007) emphasises that student support in DL is indispensible, the question remains: relevant for whom? DL programmes therefore need to be evaluated to determine the fit between the developmental needs of the teachers and the programme design. Tait’s definition of student support in a DL programme stresses the relationship between programme design and student profile: ‘By the term ‘student support in ODL’ is meant the range of service both for individuals and for students in groups which complements the course materials or learning resources that are uniform for all pupils, and which are often perceived as the major offering of institutions using open and distance education’ (Tait 2000, 289).

Zheng and Smaldino (2003, 157) suggest that learner characteristics and needs be considered as one of the key elements in the design of any effective distance learning programme.

According to Perraton (2000, 60–67), DL is mainly implemented because it provides easier access to learning opportunities, is more cost effective and facilitates the implementation of new policies in times of change. In developing countries such as South Africa, Brazil and various sub-Saharan countries (Schachter et al. 2005, 9), DL is furthermore seen as a relatively quick and cost effective way to address teacher shortages. The capacity of DL to ensure skills development and to improve practice is the main focus of many inquiries in the field. South African designers of DL programmes should take cognisance of evaluation studies conducted on DL programmes nationally and internationally.

Research on DL for teacher training has predominantly focused on developed countries such as the United States (Lobman et al. 2004; Olsen, Donaldson and Hudson 2010), European countries (Lea 2000; Ojala, Karevaara and Reunamo 2004), and Australia (Dickson, Fleet, and Watt 2000; Green et al. 2010). These countries all have easy access to information and communication technologies (ICTs) to facilitate DL programmes and as a means to provide student support. Authors also mostly report findings on the evaluations of online programmes for the professional development of teachers. Studies conducted in developed countries where ICT is more readily available found no significant differences between the academic results of traditionally trained ECD students and those studying through DL programmes (Lea 2000; Dickson, Fleet and Watt 2000).

A study conducted in Australia (Green et al. 2010), explored an online programme for early childhood teachers. Although the focus of that study was the development of pedagogy within the online programme, the reconceptualising of the programme was underpinned by the socio-cultural environment of students as well as aspects such as social, reflective and experiential learning. Green et al. (2010, 261) believe that a greater sensitivity to the communities of which the teacher-students are part of will contribute to improved the professional
Professional development for reception year teachers in an ODL developing context

development of early childhood teachers in online teacher education. Their study strengthens the premise that programmes for the professional development of Grade R teachers in a developing context should not only embrace critical components of quality DL programmes as identified in international studies, but should also accommodate the specific profile of students to ensure programme efficacy.

Limited literature could be found on the evaluation of DL programmes for the training of pre-school teachers in developing countries. Evaluations of a DL programme for the professional development of under-qualified primary school teachers implemented in Brazil (i.e. the Proformação Programme for the Development of Primary Teachers) reported on the barriers that DL may encounter in a developing context (Joia 2002; Bof 2004). According to Joia (2002, 22), the poor academic background of under-qualified practising teachers, language barriers, as well as geographic factors hampered the successful implementation of this particular DL programme.

The quality of the majority of DL programmes for teacher education in South Africa is poor in terms of improving practice (NADEOSA 2006, 10). According to Welch and Gultig (2002, 38), practice should be improved by encouraging more school-focused and classroom-based in-service teacher education which will enable teachers to reflect upon and improve their own practice. A practice-based focus becomes even more crucial where students have little or no prior experience of a particular school phase, such as the Reception Year. Since the success of ODL programmes in developed countries is also ascribed to relevant prior knowledge of students (Lea 2000, 12), the significance of student profile for programme design cannot be ignored.

To conclude, the studies by Bof (2004) and Green et al. (2010), conducted in two countries at the opposite ends of the developmental spectrum, emphasise that it is imperative to ensure that a DL programme for the professional development of teachers is tailor-made to not only suit the educational needs of a country but also the profile of the specific student population. While DL is often the only viable option to assist with early childhood teacher shortages, the literature emphasises the very different set of rules applying to DL for the professional development of teachers in a developing context. The evaluation of a DL programme for the professional development of Reception Year teachers is imperative for identifying barriers and finding ways to address obstacles which may hamper the realisation of professional Reception Year teaching competency as programme outcome. Literature offers criteria for DL programmes for the professional development of teachers which may hold clues for the effective professional development of Reception Year teacher training via DL programmes in South Africa.
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Educationists mostly agree that DL holds many advantages for the professional development of teachers (Greig et al. 2002, 27; Creed 2001, 23). Many authors, however, express concern regarding the success of DL, and insist that intensive research in the field is essential to ensure effective practice (Perraton, Creed and Robinson 2002, 18; Rumajogee et al. 2003, 14). According to a literature review, designers of DL programmes for teacher training should take cognisance of the following core components and determinants to ensure that programmes will lead teacher-students to attain knowledge-based and performance-based competencies for Reception Year education:

Ideographical factors

Tait (2000, 290) view situational analysis as a prerequisite for the designing of effective DL programmes in which the design accommodates student character and relevant situated determinants to ensure professional development as the learning outcome. Biggs (2003, 18) identifies two major ways in which students approach learning, i.e. surface and deep learning. Students who use the former rely on memorising and factual recall, and are unlikely to achieve high quality learning outcomes and anticipated competencies. Deep learners, on the other hand, seek meaningful relationships between concepts, and integrate the newly learned knowledge into existing knowledge structures (Chang and Chang 2008, 18). Biggs (2003, 18) views prior knowledge as an important personal determinant of deep learning; teacher training programmes should therefore take personal and situated determinants into consideration to ensure effective learning. This implies that programme design and content should not only be congruent with the student profile, but the mode of delivery should also provide the teacher-students with the theoretical knowledge and practical experience to enable them to link theory with practice. Only then will learning outcomes dovetail with professional competency and will students be able to apply knowledge in practice. If their previous circumstances did not allow for prior knowledge and experience of Reception Year teaching and learning, students may not be able to integrate newly acquired knowledge into existing knowledge structures without contextual learning.

Social learning

Various authors regard social learning as an essential component of effective DL. This includes group discussions, co-operative problem solving and collaborative learning (Brownlee and Berthelsen 2006, 10; Young and Lewis 2008, 603). Researchers agree that interactive activities provide a good opportunity for
professional development through reflection and the sharing of pedagogical knowledge and skill. In most developed countries social networking and design features such as virtual learning communities and other ICTs form part of teacher education programmes. Although most teachers who study and train through DL in South Africa do not have access to ICT resources because of socio-economic barriers and rural isolation, higher education institutions are increasingly exploring and implementing ICTs as a means to accommodate the social aspect of learning.

**Reflective learning**

Several authors stress the importance of providing teacher-students with the opportunity to reflect on effective teaching and learning practices (Ball 2000, 506; Sandberg, Anstett and Wahlgren 2007, 315). Ball (2000, 506) suggests that students should ‘be given an abundance of opportunities to struggle with the realities of implementing […] theories through teacher research and classroom teaching and for reflection on theories and practice within a supportive, yet challenging, learning context. Thus their learning becomes intellectual as well as activity-based.’ Rendering a supportive context for reflection on practice in a developing context, needs careful planning to ensure that teacher-students can relate to best practices, as modelled through the programme. In light of the personal and situational factors mentioned before, best practices as implemented in a developed context cannot serve as benchmarks for reflection on practice in a developing context.

**Experiential learning**

Another determinant in effective teacher education programmes is the way students are provided with the opportunity for professional development through experiential learning (Brownlee and Berthelsen 2006; Ball 2000). According to Lobman et al. (2004, 6), mere academic achievement does not guarantee that qualifications will improve or that classroom practice will be positively impacted. The practice of teaching is a situated and interpretive contextual practice (South African Department of Education 2005, 6). Only when students are exposed to quality classroom environments and have the opportunity to pragmatically link learning content in a meaningful and reflective manner, will professional development be effective (Lobman et al. 2004, 8). According to Sandberg et al. (2007, 316), the application of practical knowledge is important for durable changes in behaviour. The lack of opportunity for situated learning in teacher education programmes has implications for the holistic assessment of professional development to determine whether the teacher-student is able
C. Kruger, O. Janse van Rensburg and C. J. Els

to apply knowledge and skills in the classroom situation. Fraser (2001, 59) distinguishes between knowledge-based and performance-based competencies and states that knowledge is evidenced ‘in action’, which refers to the need for the assessment of teacher-students in real-life contexts where they have the opportunity to demonstrate their ability to apply their knowledge in practice.

![Figure 1: Core components of an effective ODL programme for Reception Year teachers](image)

Figure 1 shows the interconnectivity of the core programme design components identified from the literature which form the theoretical framework of this article.

**EMPIRICAL STUDY**

**Research environment**

The School of Continuing Teacher Education (SCTE) in the Faculty of Educational Sciences of the North-West University (NWU) directs the design and implementation of its ODL programmes at a large number of under qualified or unqualified teachers working mostly in rural areas and with little experience of tertiary studies. As the students are already full-time teachers, they are not able to enrol for full-time courses at universities. To meet the demand, the SCTE established 29 study centres throughout South Africa. Each teacher-student is supported by optional, but strongly recommended, contact sessions at a study
centre within a radius of ±100 km from her or his school where all modules are facilitated three times per semester and during two vacation schools per year. The centres are located according to the density of the teacher-student population, where qualified facilitators support the students and the latter get opportunity to interact with other students in groups. Interactive whiteboards provide the opportunity for real-time teaching by lecturers.

The Foundation Phase Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE) programme of the SCTE meets the following principles of ODL as stated by Kanuka and Conrad (2003, 39): (i) all students with a prior three-year teaching qualification may enrol; (ii) students can begin a course at any time and at any location throughout South Africa; (iii) facilitation is provided at contact centres throughout South Africa, and (iv) a systems approach is applied. Asynchronous design features of the programme include: study guides, DVDs that explain module content by illustrating various classroom situations, correspondence via email and telephone, a year planner, tutorial letters, as well as mobile text messages. Study resources such as books and articles, as well as free access to the Internet at each study centre, ensure optimal teaching-learning support.

The Foundation Phase ACE programme covers aspects such as pedagogical content, curriculum studies, educational law, systems and management, foundation studies in education which embody the history of education and the development of a personal philosophy of education, and also computer literacy.

The SCTE model scores relatively high on student support, seems to compare well with international models and provides a cost-effective medium for delivering professional teacher training in low-income communities. Its quality was commended by an external international review panel of the Open University of London. Nevertheless, the plea in the literature for a more context-sensitive design to improve the quality of distance learning programmes worldwide gave rise to the following research question: How does the design of this ODL programme accommodate the profile of the teacher-students as well as the core components of effective ODL, to ensure that the programme will help South African Foundation Phase teacher-students to attain knowledge-based, as well as performance-based, competencies for Reception Year education?

**Research paradigm**

The theoretical framework (Figure 1) embodies the criteria for effective DL programmes for the professional development of Reception Year teachers. A quantitative study was conducted within the objective-functionalistic paradigm with regard to the epistemological nature of social theory (Burrell and Morgan 1979, 26). The study focused on explanations of the status quo aimed at addressing
problems and hoped to improve theory regarding effective DL programmes for Reception Year teachers in the South African context.

Aims
The aim of this study was twofold: to evaluate the inclusion of the internationally acclaimed critical core components of quality teacher education, and how and if the typical profile of the Foundation Phase teacher-student who enrols for an ODL programme in the South African context was recognised by the programme design to include Reception Year teaching competencies as programme outcome. The investigation thus aimed to determine the possible relationship between the core components of an effective DL programme propounded in the literature, and how facilitators rated the extent to which these components were accommodated by the Foundation Phase ODL programme to include the development of Reception Year teaching competencies as programme outcome.

Sample and method
Two study populations, teacher-students enrolled for the Foundation Phase ACE programme of the SCTE, and the facilitators of the programme, were asked to complete surveys. Participation was not compulsory and only n=98 of the 300 (33%) teacher-students enrolled for the programme, and n=13 of the 29 facilitators (44.83%) opted to complete the surveys for these convenience samples. Whereas the literature emphasises the importance of a context-sensitive approach to DL programme design whereby the background and context of the teacher-student are accommodated, it was deemed important to first determine the profile of the teacher-student enrolled for the ACE Foundation Phase programme. Both surveys gathered ideographic data regarding the general profile of teacher-students in the study population. The perceptions of the programme facilitators were regarded as more objective reflections on ground level than the competency rating of the students, which would be influenced by social desirability (Grunwald and Satow 1970). Therefore, the facilitator survey included a student competency rating. Facilitators furthermore rated (on a Likert-type scale) the importance of the core components as identified from literature (Figure 1) for effective programme design for Reception Year teacher training. They also rated (on the same Likert-type scale) to what degree they felt the SCTE programme design had implemented these components.
Data analysis

Data were captured and statistically analysed by means of SAS statistical software (StatSoft 2006). Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) and percentage frequencies were calculated for all items. Cohen’s (1988) effect size (d) was used to determine practically significant discrepancies between the level of importance of the core components as indicated by the facilitators (Table 1), and the level at which they rated the Foundation Phase ACE programme to measure up to their expectations regarding the development of Reception Year teaching proficiency.

FINDINGS

Teacher-student profile

Figure 2 presents a synopsis of the profile of the teacher-students enrolled for the Foundation Phase ACE programme based on data gathered from both the teacher-students and facilitators. Findings indicate that the target population consists mostly of mature, experienced, female teachers who predominantly work and live in rural areas. As very few Reception Year classes have been implemented in rural areas, the high percentage of participants teaching in rural areas (73.96%) substantiates the surmise that these teacher-students do not have the opportunity for situational experience learning and exposure to quality school readiness programmes. Furthermore, only 3.26 per cent of the participants indicated that they are responsible for the education of Reception Year pupils.

The lack of prior knowledge of Reception Year teaching and learning was confirmed as 83 per cent of the students have no experience of the critical Foundation Phase grade which is to become part of the compulsory school system by 2014. These findings have implications for programme design.
Facilitator reflection regarding the core aspects of a Reception Year teacher education programme

The facilitators were asked to indicate how important they regarded the implementation of the core components for Reception Year teacher training and how the Foundation Phase programme measured up to them. Effect sizes were calculated between the level of importance assigned and the level in which the Foundation Phase programme measured up to these expectations. As can be seen from Table 1, medium and large practically significant discrepancies (effect sizes $\geq 0.5$) were calculated for all core components.
Table 1: Facilitators’ evaluation of the Foundation Phase programme design with regard to the core components expected for Reception Year teacher training

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Core components of Reception Year teaching and learning</th>
<th>Importance</th>
<th>Averages</th>
<th>Implementation</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>d*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Professional Reception Year teaching competencies</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>2.38</td>
<td>0.0254</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Linking theory with practice</td>
<td>2.92</td>
<td>2.31</td>
<td>0.0254</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Reflection on effective Reception Year teaching and learning</td>
<td>2.77</td>
<td>1.85</td>
<td>0.0045</td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Social learning</td>
<td>2.62</td>
<td>1.92</td>
<td>0.0564</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Linking new knowledge to previous experience of Reception Year education</td>
<td>2.70</td>
<td>1.92</td>
<td>0.0180</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Practical experience within the Reception Year context</td>
<td>2.92</td>
<td>1.92</td>
<td>0.0059</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 To gain knowledge of the characteristics of the five/six year old learner</td>
<td>2.92</td>
<td>2.25</td>
<td>0.0544</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Practice experience through formative assessment/feedback on teaching skills within the Reception Year context</td>
<td>2.92</td>
<td>1.92</td>
<td>0.0019</td>
<td>1.10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*d < 0.4: small effect with no practically significant discrepancy
0.5 < d < 0.7: medium effect which tends towards practically significant discrepancy
d > 0.8: large effect that indicates practically significant discrepancy – indicated in Bold

The largest discrepancies between level of importance and the level in which the programme complies with these criteria were measured in the way the programme provides for reflection on effective Reception Year teaching, opportunity for experiential learning and the implementation of formative assessment of Reception Year teaching competencies. The majority (77%) felt that the ability to reflect on effective Reception Year teaching and learning practices was very important, while only 23 per cent experienced that the Foundation Phase programme design
provided an opportunity for reflection on Reception Year teaching and learning practices (second largest effect $d = 0.97$, indicating a practically significant discrepancy). A larger majority (85%) felt that the ability to link new knowledge to previous experiences of Reception Year education was very important, while only 31 percent indicated that this ability was fully incorporated in the Foundation Phase programme involving Reception Year education (large effect $d = 0.76$). Most facilitators (92%) indicated that it was very important that experiential learning should form part of a programme for Reception Year, while only 46 percent felt that the programme provided the opportunity for such learning (large effect $d = 0.93$). This response may be grounded in the fact that the programme does not provide for practice teaching other than the teachers’ prior teaching experience. Almost all (92%) of the facilitators were of the opinion that it was very important to provide an opportunity for formative assessment and feedback on Reception Year teaching competencies within the Reception Year context, while only 31 per cent said that this component was fully implemented in the Foundation Phase programme (largest effect $d = 1.10$, indicating practically significant discrepancy).

**SYNOPSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Data gathered on the profile of teacher-students enrolled for the Foundation Phase ACE programme confirm the specific needs regarding professional development as Reception Year teachers. Personal factors such as the lack of prior knowledge of Reception Year teaching and learning, poor proficiency in the language of teaching and learning, and a general inability to use ICT for professional development need to be recognised by the distance learning programme design.

The medium and large practically significant discrepancies that were calculated between the level of importance assigned to the core components by the facilitators, and the extent to which the programme implemented these core components, indicate that the programme design did not measure up to the facilitators’ expectations. The mostly negative evaluation by the facilitators of the way the programme accommodated the core components of Reception Year education may be ascribed to one or more of the following aspects:

1. The programme did not include a practical component to ensure competency in classroom context and, as the student-profile indicates, the teacher-students were mostly not acquainted with the Reception Year education context, resulting in an inability to link new knowledge of Reception Year education with an existing knowledge framework;
2. The one year timeframe did not allow teacher-students to develop the necessary knowledge and competencies to bring about change in a new knowledge field such as the learning readiness of five/six year olds, of which they had no or little prior knowledge and experience; and

3. The programme was designed before the Reception Year formed part of the Foundation Phase; this may have resulted in too little focus of content on Reception Year teaching and learning. Where it is required that teachers apply content in order to design age-appropriate learning tasks, the difference in teaching approaches to ensure developmentally appropriate practice may need to be addressed more comprehensively.

Because the Foundation Phase programme does not specialise in Reception Year education, but includes all four grades of the Foundation Phase, it is not surprising that most facilitators felt that the programme design did not provide sufficient opportunity to develop professional Reception Year teaching competencies. Reception Year pupils have specific needs and therefore require teachers to obtain specific Reception Year educational knowledge and skills. The current design creates little opportunity for reflection on effective teaching and learning in the Reception Year. Compulsory contact sessions are not utilised as opportunities for social and reflective learning regarding the most effective teaching practice in Reception Year education, mainly because very few are Reception Year teachers.

As the teacher-students mostly teach grades one to three in rural areas, they do not have the opportunity to reflect on effective Reception Year teaching and learning practices, cannot link newly acquired knowledge with previous Reception Year teaching experiences, are not able to acquire experience learning within the Reception Year classroom, and do not have the opportunity for formative assessment and feedback on teaching competencies in the Reception Year educational context. These findings chime with the theory of Biggs (2003) that meaningful learning opportunities concerning Reception Year education may be hampered by situational and personal factors. Although the programme is high on student support, the support should also be sensitive to the specific professional needs and background of the target population. Access to relevant and quality content via study material and well-equipped resource centres, direct teaching by facilitators during contact sessions and via the interactive white boards will not necessarily yield Grade R teaching competencies as a programme outcome if the profile of the teacher-student indicated a limited experience of Grade R practice.
Furthermore, the current design of the Foundation Phase programme does not include a practical component in which students have the opportunity to experience and implement their newly acquired Reception Year knowledge and skills in practice. Although knowledge may be transferred to teacher-students through study material, the literature is clear on the importance of experiential learning in the classroom context to ensure the development of performance-based competencies. Programme features should therefore enable teacher-students to put knowledge of the five to six year old learners’ characteristics into action by providing for a practical teaching component.

ODL programmes provide a viable model to remedy the shortage of qualified Reception Year teachers. Since the financial and geographical benefits of the model provide hundreds of underqualified or unqualified Reception Year teachers with an opportunity to obtain an accredited qualification, this model could impact on education where it is most needed, namely the learning readiness of pupils from poor rural areas. Investing in the quality of open distance learning programmes is thus of prime concern. The literature as well as the findings from this study confirm that teacher-students who are preparing to take on the responsibility of educating Reception Year pupils need to experience quality real-life Reception Year practices and the opportunity to put their newly gained knowledge into practice. They should have the opportunity for formative assessment of and feedback on teaching competencies within the Reception Year context, and to reflect on their own competencies as Reception Year teachers. Considering that the Department of Education is in the process of implementing Reception Year education, it is strongly recommended that programme designers take cognition of the theory on effective programme design as described above (Figure 1). Subject knowledge alone will not ensure the effective professional development of Reception Year teachers. Social, reflective, and experiential learning in real-life Reception Year classroom contexts is imperative for the future training of Reception Year teachers. It is not sufficient to merely ensure that programme design accommodates core components as prescribed by international experts; these core components should also be tailor-made to fit the profile of the distance-learning teacher-student. Teacher-students need the opportunity to use their own judgment and form their own philosophy about effective Reception Year educational practices in the light of their own circumstances as well as their understanding and experience of the five/six year old child’s development.

Research should determine the way forward for ODL programme designs for the professional development of Reception Year teachers in South Africa. The implementation of ICTs for reflective learning, e.g. training videos which depict real-life Reception Year classroom activities in the South African context,
innovative ways to implement the interactive white boards for accommodation of social and work-integrated learning as well as simulation classrooms in which teacher-students get the opportunity to reflect and peer review each other, could be investigated as possible strategies to provide the opportunity for contextual learning. A more specialised approach to the training of Reception Year teachers through ODL is also recommended.

The South African context requires models and programmes for Reception Year teacher education that recognise the personal, situational, socio-economical and geographical factors of teacher-students, especially those who live and work in rural and semi-rural communities. Where DL is used for the professional development of Reception Year teachers, the teachers should also take the responsibility to not only focus on subject knowledge and pass-rates, but also to reflect on and evaluate their own pedagogical practices to develop a professional teaching culture for Reception Year education in South Africa. Further qualitative case study research is necessary to investigate, at a context-sensitive interpretivistic level, alternative interpretations of the findings of this study beyond quantitative meta-analysis and speculations of quantitative data.

These findings and recommendations could be of value to designers of future DL Foundation Phase and specialised Reception Year teacher education programmes. At the heart of the research was the urge to help ensure each South African child’s democratic right to quality Reception Year education by the year 2014, as envisioned by the Department of Education, regardless of socio-economical or geographic barriers, and to help narrow the existing learning-readiness gap that troubles South African education.

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Professional development for reception year teachers in an ODL developing context


