

# Life Skills Development in Learners with and Without Pre-Grade R Experiences

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Publication Date: 2025/12/02

**Abstract:** In numerous South African classes, learners enter Grade R with different levels of experience in early childhood education, which can impact their capability to adjust into formal learning environments and participate in important life skills activities. This study aimed to explore how life skills are developed in Grade R learners with and without pre-Grade R experience. A qualitative research approach was used along with Bronfenbrenner ecological system theory. The population of the study was Grade R teachers. A purposive sampling method was used to select eight teachers from four schools in the Nzhelele Area that had multiple Grade R classes. Data collection was done through semi structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. The findings suggested that learners who attended pre-Grade R exhibited more school readiness, improved social communication skills, and early acquisition of crucial skills, compared to those without such exposure. They also show early literacy development and emotional regulation due to structured early learning environments.

**Keywords:** Early Childhood Education, Learner's Diversity, Life Skills, Pre-Grade R, School Readiness.

**How to Cite:** Malise Tshimangadzo Precious; Mulovhedzi Shonisani Agnes (2025) Life Skills Development in Learners with and Without Pre-Grade R Experiences. *International Journal of Innovative Science and Research Technology*, 10(11), 2124-2132. <https://doi.org/10.38124/ijisrt/25nov1083>

## I. INTRODUCTION

Early childhood is a significant stage for creating the cognitive, emotional, social, and physical essentials vital for lifelong learning and development. During this period, children gain crucial life skills such as social-emotional learning, social interaction, decision-making, communication, and self-awareness; skills that are critical not only for school readiness but also for long-term success and flexibility (United Nations Children's Funds, 2021; Department of Basic Education, 2022). In the South African education system, Grade R which is the Reception Year plays a pivotal role as a bridge between informal early childhood development and formal schooling. It is in this year that learners begin to adjust to structured learning programmes aligned with the National Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS). However, one of the key challenges encountered by Grade R teachers is the diversity of learners' early learning backgrounds. Whereas a few learners entering Grade R participated in structured pre-Grade R programmes such as Early Childhood Development (ECD) centres or crèches, others started with little to no prior school experience. This difference results in unequal levels of school readiness, mainly in terms of life skills attainment (Thrive by Five Index, 2022). Learners without early learning exposure often struggle with classroom routines, peer collaboration,

and emotional regulation, while their peers with prior school experience may display stronger selfmanagement and social awareness (Motshekga, 2021; Van der Berg et al., 2019).

The Grade R Life Skills programme helps learners grow in all areas. It includes four main components: Starting to Learn, Personal and Social Health, Creative Arts, and Physical Education (DBE, 2019; Nkonyane & Makalela, 2020). Despite the comprehensive design of the curriculum and support frameworks, such as the National Curriculum Framework (NCF), implementation gaps remain in adapting teaching strategies to meet the needs of diverse learners in Grade R classrooms. Many teachers report feeling underprepared to manage the wide range of developmental readiness, particularly when it comes to delivering differentiated teaching in life skills content areas (Van Staden, 2021; DBE, 2022).

This study is important because it examines how having experiences before Grade R affects the development of life skills in the four main components. This research will help us understand the unique problems and benefits for children who received early schooling and those who did not. This will lead to better teaching methods that include and support all learners in Grade R. This aligns with the country's goals, such as those outlined in the National Integrated ECD Policy

(2015), which advocates for making quality early learning programmes available to everyone. It also connects to the ECD Quality Toolkit (2023), which focuses on the importance of growth and fairness. This study addresses an important gap in research because most studies have mainly looked at language and math, while not much focus has been given to life skills as a separate area of learning. Since life skills is very important for a child's happiness and success in school, it is critical to understand how early learning experiences impact these skills.

➤ *Research Objectives:*

To identify the challenges that Grade R teachers face when teaching life skills development to learners with different early childhood education backgrounds.

➤ *Research Questions:*

What challenges do Grade R teachers encounter in supporting life skills development in learners with diverse early childhood education backgrounds?

## II. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The early years of a child's development are critical for establishing foundational skills that underpin lifelong learning and well-being (Heckman, 2019). In South Africa, the Grade R classroom plays a crucial role in formal education by bridging the gap between early childhood experiences and structured learning in the foundation phase. The Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) for Life Skills outlines four content areas: Beginning Knowledge, Personal and Social Well-being, Creative Arts, and Physical Education that are essential for holistic development (DBE, 2011). These areas aim to foster emotional, social, physical, and cognitive skills necessary for successful school integration. Despite these policy frameworks, a significant number of learners enter Grade R without prior exposure to pre-Grade R programmes, especially in disadvantaged communities (Rademeyer & Jacklin, 2023). This absence of early structured learning often results in developmental delays in key life skills such as self-regulation, communication, and social interaction (Taylor & Vinjevald, 2022). On the contrary, learners with pre-Grade R experience typically show stronger readiness and engagement with the Life Skills curriculum (Sonn & Franks, 2019). While CAPS provides guidelines for inclusive and developmentally appropriate teaching, teachers frequently encounter challenges addressing the varying readiness levels within Grade R classrooms (Cameron, 2020). Insufficient training and resources further complicate efforts to meet diverse learners' needs, particularly in life skills development (Mkhize & Nxumalo, 2021). This research focused specifically on how pre-Grade R experiences impact life skills development. Understanding these dynamics is critical for informing teaching practices, curriculum adaptation, and policy decisions that promote equitable learning outcomes (Hall & Woolner, 2021). This study seeks to fill this gap by exploring the effects of pre-Grade R experience on learners' life skills development and how teachers navigate these differences within the CAPS framework.

## III. LITERATURE REVIEW

➤ *Understanding Life Skills in Early Childhood Education*

Life skills are foundational abilities that enable individuals to navigate daily challenges and meet social demands. In early childhood, these include emotional regulation, problem-solving, decision-making, co-operation, communication, and self-awareness (World Health Organisation, 2020; UNICEF, 2021). These skills are vital for effective learning and adjustment in school environments. The South African CAPS curriculum emphasises life skills as a standalone subject in the Foundation Phase, incorporating four content areas: Beginning Knowledge, Personal and Social Well-being, Creative Arts, and Physical Education (DBE, 2011). Each of these areas aims to support learners' holistic development by addressing physical, social, emotional, and creative domains (Pienaar et al., 2021). This research shows that children with structured early learning backgrounds develop stronger life skills. For instance, exposure to ECD programmes has been linked with enhanced emotional maturity, co-operation, and communication in school-aged children (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2021; Heath & Roach, 2020). According to UNICEF (2021), Life Skills incorporates a set of psychosocial and interpersonal abilities that support children in effectively managing challenges, building relationships, and making responsible decisions. The organisation argues that developing these skills in the early years lays the groundwork for resilience, emotional regulation, and lifelong learning. Similarly, WHO (2020) emphasises that life skills such as empathy, communication, problemsolving, and co-operation are crucial for a child's ability to thrive in school and society. However, the researchers argue that in the South African Grade R context, life skills must be viewed through a holistic and integrated lens. Since learners require not only cognitive and behavioural skills to succeed academically, but also emotional maturity, independence, and the ability to work with others. It is especially important for learners without pre-Grade R experience, who often enter the classroom without having developed such skills through structured early learning or social exposure. Therefore, Life Skills in the Foundation Phase must be intentionally taught, supported by a curriculum such as CAPS that emphasises both social-emotional learning and practical functioning, especially in diverse and unequal classroom contexts.

➤ *Challenges Faced by Grade R Teachers When Teaching Life Skills in Diverse Classrooms*

Teaching Life Skills becomes particularly demanding in classrooms where learners have mixed early learning experiences. Teachers must accommodate both developmentally advanced learners and those who lack basic life capabilities. Cameron (2020) explains that the lack of an ECD background makes learners more reliant on the teacher, limiting time for group teaching or play-based learning. Mkhize and Nxumalo (2021) report that many Grade R teachers feel unprepared to manage such differences, especially without tailored training or support material. Furthermore, the CAPS document provides limited guidance on differentiating instruction within the Life Skills subject for

diverse learner backgrounds (DBE, 2011). Unless early interventions and inclusive strategies are implemented, learners without pre-Grade R experience may continue to fall behind.

While South African research has made steps in exploring early literacy and numeracy, Life Skills development remains under-examined, particularly in relation to learners with no pre-Grade R exposure (Van Niekerk & Jacklin, 2023). This study is significant as it directly addresses this gap, offering insight into the developmental inequalities that affect classroom dynamics, learner progress, and curriculum implementation. It also contributes to policy by highlighting the need for differentiated teaching support, improved ECD access, and better teacher preparation to ensure equity in early learning and school readiness for all.

Modise and Mosia (2021) highlight that one of the primary challenges is the lack of readiness amongst learners who did not attend pre-Grade R programmes. These children often struggle with basic routines, following instructions, group co-operation, and emotional regulation—factors that are essential for participating fully in the Life Skills curriculum.

However, Motshekga and Dlamini (2022) argue that teachers are the ones who are not adequately trained to implement differentiated strategies that address learners' varied backgrounds. Many Foundation Phase teachers report feeling overwhelmed by the diverse levels of development in one classroom, especially when learners without early childhood education require more attention and support. As a result, the researchers stated that learners without pre-Grade R experience often require more one-on-one guidance, struggle with attention span, and take longer to adjust socially and emotionally. These learners may begin to fall behind not because of lack of intelligence, but because this may create pressure on the teacher to divide attention unequally, which may unintentionally disadvantage the learners.

#### ➤ *Theoretical Foundation*

This study is underpinned by Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory, which offers an inclusive framework for considering the several layers of influence that shape a child's development. Bronfenbrenner (1979, 2005) anticipated that a child's growth and learning are affected by the various environmental systems they interact with, both directly and indirectly. These systems include the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. In the context of this study on life skills development in learners with and without pre-Grade R experiences, Bronfenbrenner's theory is mainly relevant because it emphasises that a child's development is not isolated but transpires within the context of organised systems, each influencing the achievement of essential life skills. The Bronfenbrenner ecological system theory includes, first the microsystem, which refers to the level that comprises the immediate environments in which the child directly interacts, such as the home, pre-Grade R centre and the Grade R classroom. Children with pre-Grade R

experience are more likely to have participated in structured environments that encourage co-operation, self-regulation, and communication (Taylor & Vinjevald, 2022). Those without pre-Grade R exposure may lack these foundational life skills due to limited engagement in learning-focused microsystems. The second level is the mesosystem which refers to the interconnections between microsystems, such as the relationship between home and school, or between ECD teachers and Grade R teachers. A strong mesosystem can reinforce life skills development, supporting smoother transitions into formal education. A weak mesosystem may hinder learners' adjustment to Grade R, especially those without prior early learning exposure.

The third level is the exosystem, which includes indirect environments that influence the child, such as a parent's workplace or educational policies. Government support for ECD funding, teachers training, and the implementation of CAPS and NCF significantly impact the quality and accessibility of early learning experiences (DBE, 2023). Learners from families affected by poverty, unemployment, or unapproachable services are more likely to miss out on pre-Grade R education, affecting their life skills development indirectly through the exosystem. Macrosystem, the fourth level, encompasses wider cultural and societal influences, such as beliefs about early childhood education, community values, and economic inequalities. In South Africa, socio-economic differences and cultural perceptions of formal early learning influence whether or not children attend pre-Grade R centres (Van Niekerk & Jacklin, 2023). These macrosystemic factors contribute to developmental gaps seen in learners' readiness for life skills-based learning in Grade R. The chronosystem, which is the last level, refers to changes over time, including changes in plans, family conditions, or societal events. For example, the growing inclusion of Grade R into the formal schooling system and developing early learning policies shape the long-term developmental path of learners (DBE, 2022). Bronfenbrenner's model supports the study's aim as it indicates how different environmental factors such as family background, access to ECD, and teacher support, influence life skills development in learners entering Grade R. It provides a lens through which to understand the diverse starting points of learners with and without pre-Grade R experience, the challenges teachers face when working with developmentally diverse learners, and the importance of systemic support for equitable early learning opportunities.

## IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### ➤ *Qualitative Research*

This study is grounded in a qualitative research methodology, which is most suitable for exploring complex human experiences, insights, and practices within natural settings. The goal of this research is to better understand how learners' pre-Grade R experiences or lack thereof, influence their development of life skills in Grade R. As well as to gain insight into the strategies and challenges that teachers face when supporting learners with different early childhood education experiences.

In this case, Grade R teachers serve as key informants whose insights offer a deeper understanding of the developmental variances they observe in their learners, how these changes impact classroom dynamics, and how they connect with the four Life Skills content areas prescribed in the CAPS document. By applying a qualitative methodology, the study serves to explore how teachers describe the life skills abilities of learners with and without structured pre-Grade R experiences, what teaching methods and classroom practices they adopt to support learners with varying levels of developmental readiness and challenges they encounter when trying to meet the needs of underprepared learners.

Teachers' observations, practices, and reflections are essential in shaping how life skills are taught and supported, particularly in the context of South Africa's diverse educational backgrounds. Furthermore, in many South African classrooms, learners come from unequal socio-economic backgrounds, and not all have had access to quality early childhood education. Through interviews and observations, qualitative research allows the researcher to capture these contextual realities, rather than relying on standardised measurements that may overlook individual experiences.

The use of qualitative methods also supports the theoretical foundation, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which highlights the interaction between learners and their environments. A qualitative approach makes it possible to examine how multiple layers of influence such as home, school, culture, and policy shape learner development and classroom interactions. Therefore, qualitative research is the most appropriate methodological approach for this study because it enables the exploration of how and why life skills development may differ among learners based on their early learning exposure.

#### ➤ *Research Design*

Creswell and Creswell (2019) explain that research design includes the research approach, the methods used to collect data, and the strategies employed to interpret the findings. This study made use of an interpretivism paradigm, because it ensures that the researcher explores the real-life experiences and views of Grade R teachers in a natural classroom setting. A strong research design also makes the study more trustworthy and meaningful in such a way that it allows the researcher to understand how early childhood education impacts the development of life skills across different learners (Fouché & Delpont, 2011). Without a clear design, the study would lack direction and might not provide reliable insights into the educational teaching of life skills.

#### ➤ *Interpretivism Paradigm*

The Interpretivism paradigm is particularly valuable in educational research, where understanding learners' growth and teachers' insights requires empathy to the environment and social background. As Nieuwenhuis (2022) explains, interpretivism allows researchers to gain insight into people's viewpoints and how they make sense of their educational experiences. As a result, the researcher becomes part of the meaning-making process, which helps generate findings that

are context-specific, holistic, and deeply descriptive (Chigudu, 2023). In early childhood education studies like this, interpretivism is relevant because it captures the complex social and developmental methods involved in children's learning transitions. It acknowledges that teachers' explanations and experiences play a key role in determining classroom practices and promoting life skills development in learners. Using this paradigm allows the research to remain flexible, responsive, and grounded in the actual experiences of Grade R teachers.

#### ➤ *Data Collection Methods*

This study uses data collection methods such as semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis to explore people's thoughts, experiences, and actions in detail. Selecting suitable data collection methods is essential since it affects the quality and relevance of the findings. Leedy and Ormrod (2021) emphasise that appropriate and ethical data collection ensures that the study produces valid and trustworthy results. Therefore, researchers must carefully choose the methods that best align with their study's purpose and approach.

In this study, which explores the development of life skills in Grade R learners with and without preGrade R experience, three qualitative data collection methods were used: semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. These methods are appropriate because they focus on understanding individuals' lived experiences within their real-world contexts (Nieuwenhuis, 2022).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with Grade R teachers to gather detailed insights into their experiences and perspectives. This method allowed for open-ended questioning guided by a flexible interview schedule, enabling the researcher to explore specific issues while allowing the teachers to express themselves freely (Maree, 2022). In this study, semi-structured interviews helped uncover how teachers perceive the influence of pre-Grade R attendance on learners' acquisition of life skills such as communication, self-care, and social interaction.

Classroom observations were used to collect data on how life skills are demonstrated and taught in practice. Observing learners in their natural classroom environment allows the researchers to witness first-hand how children behave, interact, and respond to learning activities (Nieuwenhuis, 2022). This method was valuable in this study because it provided non-verbal and contextual information that complemented the interview data, such as how learners with or without prior ECD exposure showed confidence, independence, or the ability to work with others.

Document analysis was used to examine teaching plans, assessment records, and school documents related to Life Skills instruction. According to Chigudu (2023), document analysis also helps the researchers understand how knowledge and skills are planned and assessed in a formal educational setting. This assists in identifying whether the curriculum content, daily routines, or teacher planning



practices show any differences in expectations or approaches toward learners with varying levels of preschool experience. Together, these three methods allowed the researchers to triangulate data by comparing what teachers say, what is observed in the classroom, and what is recorded in official documents. This served to build a rich and trustworthy understanding of how life skills are developed in Grade R learners from diverse early childhood backgrounds.

#### ➤ *Selection Criteria of Research Participants*

The participants in the study were selected through purposive sampling. According to Pham (2021), purposive sampling is suitable since it seeks to explore complex human experiences within specific contexts. Purposive sampling was used to select participants who are most knowledgeable and experienced in teaching Grade R learners. This non-probability sampling method allows the researcher to intentionally choose individuals who can provide rich, relevant, and in-depth information about the research topic (Maree, 2022). The participants of the study were eight Grade R teachers from four schools with more than one Grade R classroom in the Nzhelele area. These teachers were selected because they teach Life Skills development of young learners and are best positioned to observe differences in readiness, social behaviour, and learning engagement.

#### ➤ *Data Analysis*

In this study, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis and it was analysed using thematic analysis (Nowell et al., 2021). The process begins with transcribing interview recordings and observation notes, followed by carefully reading, coding, and categorizing the data into themes such as communication skills, emotional development, social behaviour, and independence. These themes were used to compare the life skills development of learners with and without pre-Grade R experience. This approach allows the researcher to deeply explore how early learning exposure shapes learners' readiness and adjustment to Grade R, as perceived by their teachers and observed in classroom settings. By using thematic analysis, the study ensured that the findings were grounded in participants' actual experiences, aligned with the interpretivist paradigm, and were able to provide meaningful insights into the role of early childhood education in life skills development.

#### ➤ *Ethical Considerations*

In this study, several ethical considerations were observed to protect the rights, dignity, and wellbeing of all participants, particularly since the research involves teachers working with young children. The researchers first submitted the research to the university committee for ethical clearance. Then the researchers sought permission from the Department of Basic Education. Informed consents were obtained from all participating teachers. They were provided with a clear explanation of the study's purpose, their role, and their right to withdraw at any stage without any consequences (Maree, 2022). Since observations will take place in classrooms with children present, permission was also requested from the school principals and, where necessary, parents or guardians, to ensure ethical access to the classroom environment. The

researcher ensured anonymity and confidentiality by using pseudonyms and by not disclosing any identifying information in the final report (Nieuwenhuis, 2022). Data collected through interviews, observations, and document reviews were securely stored and used solely for academic purposes. Additionally, the principle of "do no harm" was applied throughout the research process, meaning that the study was designed and conducted in a way that avoids any form of emotional, psychological, or professional discomfort for participants (Chigudu, 2023). These measures ensure that the research is carried out with integrity, respect, and accountability, which is particularly important when working in educational settings and with vulnerable populations such as young learners.

#### ➤ *Trustworthiness*

To ensure the trustworthiness of this qualitative study, the researcher applied four key criteria such as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These criteria help establish the quality and reliability of the research findings in the absence of statistical measures (Nowell et al., 2021). Credibility refers to the confidence in the truth of the findings. In this study, credibility was ensured by triangulating data through multiple sources semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. Member checking was also used, where participants were given an opportunity to review and confirm the accuracy of the researcher's interpretations of their responses.

(Maree, 2022). Transferability is the degree to which the study's findings can be applied to other similar contexts. Although qualitative research does not aim for generalisation, detailed descriptions of the research setting, participants, and procedures was provided to allow readers to make informed judgments about whether the findings are relevant to their own contexts (Nieuwenhuis, 2022). Dependability refers to the consistency of the research process over time. This was achieved by keeping a detailed audit trail, documenting each step of the research process from data collection to analysis so that the procedures can be reviewed and repeated if necessary (Nowell et al., 2021). Confirmability ensures that the findings are shaped by the participants' experiences and not the researcher's bias. To achieve this, the researcher maintained objectivity by keeping reflexive notes and carefully recording decisions made during the study. This allows for transparency and accountability throughout the research process (Chigudu, 2023). By addressing these four aspects of trustworthiness, the study produces findings that are credible, authentic, and useful, particularly in understanding how pre-Grade R experience influences life skills development in Grade R learners.

## V. FINDINGS

In this part of the study, we share and talk about what we learned from the eight Grade R teachers at four different schools. Each school had several Grade R classes, allowing the researcher to get different viewpoints from various situations. The interviews focused on a key question: What challenges do Grade R teachers face when helping young

children with different early education backgrounds develop life skills? From the data analysis, three main themes came up, showing how experiences before Grade R affect children's ability to learn life skills.

The participants were coded as follows: T1 -T8, which represents teacher 1 to 8; SCHL A-D, which stands for school A – D.

These are the themes that emerged from the participating teachers on challenges that Grade R teachers encounter in supporting life skills development in learners with diverse early childhood education backgrounds.

#### ➤ School Readiness and Adjustment

The teachers reported that learners with pre-Grade R experience demonstrated better school readiness upon entering Grade R. These learners were generally more prepared to cope with routines such as sitting in a circle, listening to instructions, and transitioning between tasks.

This was confirmed by T1 SCHL-A: *“The ones from crèche know how to wait their turn, share toys, and even ask questions, it makes a huge difference.”*

In contrast, learners without prior exposure needed more support adjusting to classroom norms and required constant reminders. These findings are consistent with Maree (2022), who highlights that early childhood education develops foundational routines that ease the transition into formal learning.

- T2 SCHL-A attest: *“I can see it on the first day. Some come ready to learn, others still cry and don't know how to behave in a group.”*
- T3 SCHL-B added to what T2 said: *“Those without pre-Grade R need help with everything such as how to hold a pencil, sit in a circle, and even how to stand in line.”*
- T4 SCHL-C confirmed: *“It's like starting from scratch. You have to teach them how to be in school before you even start the Life Skills content.”*

This theme highlighted how learners' prior exposure to early childhood education (pre-Grade R) impacts their ability to adjust to the Grade R classroom environment. Children who have attended pre-Grade R programmes are often exposed to structured environments where they learn basic classroom behaviour and routines. This exposure enables them to transition smoothly into Grade R. In contrast, children without pre-Grade R experience often display struggles with basic school norms, requiring more time and teacher support to adjust.

#### ➤ Development of Social and Emotional Skills

Teachers saw noticeable differences in how students grew socially and emotionally. Kids who went to pre-Grade R programmes were more confident, better at making friends, and had better control over their feelings.

- T2 SCHL-B and T3 SCHL-D said: *“I noticed that kids who didn't go to preschool were more likely to cry often, be mean, or play by themselves. They don't know how to handle disagreements. They either push others or cry until I help them.”*

This idea is like what Chigudu (2023) said about how important it is for kids to interact with friends early on to learn how to control their emotions and be strong.

- T1 SCHL-A confirmed: *“Kids who haven't been in pre-Grade R don't know how to take turns or handle being upset. Some kids are shy and don't like to talk. Some kids push or grab because they don't know how to play politely.”*
- T3 SCHL-C highlighted: *“They didn't learn how to share or show their feelings before starting Grade R. I spend time teaching kids to say, ‘I'm angry’ instead of hitting.”*
- T5 SCHL-A stated: *“Kids with ECD show more self-assurance. They can easily take part in group activities. Many people are feeling sad and upset because they didn't get early learning. I can't teach life skills well when I must comfort children who are crying.”*

This theme focuses on how well students can get along with others, express their feelings, and deal with everyday social situations. Life skills are essential qualities that help us solve problems, share with others, control our feelings, ask for what we need, and handle our emotions on our own. These are crucial in places where young kids learn. Children who have experience in pre-Grade R usually have better social and emotional skills because they have had time to practice interacting with others in groups. Students who do not have this experience might misbehave, cry often, or find it hard to connect with their peers.

#### ➤ Life Skills in Daily Routines

The ability to perform daily self-care routines such as toileting, handwashing, and packing away learning materials was significantly more developed in learners who had pre-Grade R exposure. This theme captures how teachers adapt their teaching strategies and classroom management to meet the needs of learners with and without pre-Grade R experience. It also highlights the challenges teachers face due to the lack of curriculum differentiation. The Life Skills curriculum assumes that learners enter Grade R with a common level of readiness. However, the reality is that learners start at different developmental stages, forcing teachers to use informal strategies such as simplifying tasks, repeating instructions, or providing extra support.

- T4 SCHL-B noted: *“Some learners can't even hold scissors or open their lunchbox. It's clear they never had to do things for themselves before.”* Teachers reported spending considerable time teaching these basic life skills to learners without early learning backgrounds. These classroom realities affirm findings by Pham (2021), who argues that early childhood programs provide essential

practice in self-help tasks and promote learner independence.

- T5 SCHL C and T6 SCHL-C said: *“Sometimes I must pause the lesson and show learners how to use scissors or open a lunchbox. And I adapt by giving them extra support during group tasks, but it affects the rest of the class.”*
- T7 SCHL-D emphasised: *“There’s pressure to complete assessments, but some children can’t even follow instructions.”*
- T8 SCHL-D alluded: *“Curriculum planners forget that not every child starts at the same place. We must fill the gap.”*

Most teachers reported having to informally tailor lessons to suit the learners needs. For example, in School A, a teacher mentioned that she simplified instructions and repeated activities more frequently for some learners. There was also limited mention of pre-assessment tools to help teachers tailor their instruction. This supports the argument by Van der Berg & Spaul (2022) that the national curriculum often assumes a uniform level of readiness, which does not reflect the realities of diverse South African classrooms. The data clearly indicates that pre-Grade R experience significantly enhances life skills development, particularly in areas of social adjustment, independence, and emotional regulation. Teachers play a critical role in bridging the developmental gap for learners without prior preschool exposure, but they also require more structured support and diversified curriculum strategies to manage these challenges effectively.

## VI. DISCUSSION

The literature reviewed in this study emphasised the critical role of early childhood education (ECE), particularly pre-Grade R exposure, in shaping children’s school readiness and life skills development. According to Maree (2022), children who attend structured early learning programmes tend to develop stronger social, emotional, and cognitive abilities, preparing them for the demands of formal schooling. Similarly, Pham (2021) highlights that early exposure to learning environments enhances children’s self-confidence, independence, and ability to interact with their peers. Global research, including findings from The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries like Canada and Australia, supports the view that quality preschool education fosters critical life skills such as self-regulation, problem-solving, and communication (OECD, 2021).

South African scholars such as Van der Berg and Spaul (2022) have shed light on inequities in access to quality early learning opportunities, particularly for children from low-income or rural areas. These disparities often lead to varied levels of readiness when learners enter Grade R. The Department of Basic Education (2021) also emphasises that

early development of life skills is essential for long-term learning success.

The findings of this study support and expand on the reviewed literature. According to data obtained from Grade R teachers, learners who had attended pre-Grade R programmes demonstrated stronger skills in communication, self-care, social interaction, and classroom behaviour. These findings affirm the view that early learning experiences are foundational to school readiness and life skill acquisition (Maree, 2022; Chigudu, 2023). Conversely, learners without prior exposure were often less independent and required more teacher support to adapt to the classroom environment reflecting the concerns raised by Van der Berg and Spaul (2022) about the long-term impact of limited access to quality ECD.

Additionally, this study contributes new insights by emphasising the teacher’s role in adapting to mixed-readiness classrooms. Less attention has been given to how teachers cope when curriculum does not accommodate differences in learner readiness. This study revealed that teachers often rely on informal strategies to support learners without pre-Grade R experience, due to the lack of differentiation in the national curriculum, highlighting a practical gap that has not been fully addressed in existing research (Chigudu, 2023).

## VII. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to understand how pre-Grade R experiences affect the development of life skills in Grade R learners. It examined teachers' viewpoints, how teachers manage their classrooms, and what the curriculum is like. Using interpretivist ideas and qualitative methodology reviews, the study found significant differences in school readiness between learners who went to pre-Grade R and those who did not. The results showed that children who had experience before Grade R usually started Grade R with better life skills. These skills included being independent, controlling their emotions, communicating well, and adjusting to classroom routines. On the other hand, learners without this background usually needed extra time, help, and direction to learn basic classroom behaviour and social skills. These differences affected how well learners could engage in learning and changed how teachers planned their lessons and ran their classrooms. The study pointed out an important problem in the Life Skills programme. It does not meet the different needs of learners in Grade R who are at varying stages of development. Teachers said they often had to change their teaching techniques on the fly to help learners who didn't have any early childhood education experience. This added extra pressure to their time and planning. These results support the idea that early childhood education is critical for a child's future success. Children who don't have pre-Grade R education are at a disadvantage when they start regular school. The study highlighted the importance of making changes in policies. This includes giving more access to good pre-Grade R programmes, creating different lesson plans for Grade R, and providing support for teachers. If South Africa wants to provide fair early learning chances, it



needs to focus on learners starting Grade R who have not had organized early childhood education.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the discoveries, a few ideas are proposed to support the improvement of life skills in Grade R learners and to address the challenges related with the need of pre-Grade R preparation such as expanding access to quality pre-Grade R instruction. This will help guarantee that all children enter Grade R with a foundational level of life skills such as independence, self-care, and social interaction. The Life Skills educational modules ought to be reviewed and adjusted to meet the needs of the learners at different levels of development. Clear guidelines, strengthened resources, and separated learning exercises ought to be provided to assist teachers in meeting the differing needs of learners with and without ECD foundations. Workshops for Grade R teachers should focus on comprehensive educating techniques, identifying formative delays, and supporting learners who need pre-Grade R exposure. Teachers should be prepared to provide focused feedback without compromising classroom administration or educational modules. Schools and local authorities should implement standard observation and developmental assessments to track learners' progress in life skills. This will help distinguish learners requiring additional early learning within the year and guarantee that interventions are convenient and viable. By implementing these ideas, instructional partners can work together toward building a comprehensive, even-handed, and strong early learning framework that prepares all learners for success in Grade R.

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