

Challenges of Grade 6 Learners' Experience when Solving Mathematical Word Problems

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ABSTRACT

Poor performance in solving mathematical word problems is a long standing challenge for all learners. The mastery or understanding of word problems is seen as a crucial test of mathematical ability. When solving such problems, learners supposedly go beyond rote learning and memorization of facts and rules without understanding in order to get the correct answer. Research shows that performance on word problems is increasingly becoming poorer and poorer every year. This study is aimed at investigating the challenges that learners face and the difficulties they encounter when solving mathematical word problems. In particular, the influence of English language proficiency and problem-solving skills learners possess were investigated as well as any other factors which could have been contributing to the challenges the learners came across.

Grade 6 learners formed the subjects for the study. The researcher believes that Grade 6 is a very important class due to the fact that it serves as both the end of Intermediate phase and the starting point of the Senior Phase. In this regard, learners in Grade 6 level should be given more attention than other classes because they are on a transition stage. The sample was from 10 schools selected randomly from a population of 18 schools in the Tshinane Circuit of the Vhembe District in the Limpopo Province. Questionnaires in the form of written tests were used and analysed quantitatively to identify the challenges and the difficulties the learners experienced. The questionnaires were analysed qualitatively to investigate these challenges in order to enable to understand and give a description. The study revealed that lack of teaching word problems in the learning and teaching situation was a strong predictor of learners' success in solving word problems. Findings in this study also suggest that language proficiency in general is a barrier to a good performance among learners.