

Against All Odds: How Do Primary Teachers Navigate in Multi-grade Teaching Contexts?

Taole Matshidiso Joyce

*University of South Africa, Department of Curriculum and Instructional Studies,
Pretoria 0003, South Africa
E-mail: taolemj@unisa.ac.za*

KEYWORDS Assessment. Lesson Planning. Teaching Strategies. Conceptualisation. Training. Support

ABSTRACT Multi-grade teaching is seen as an important policy option for providing access to education for learners in remote areas. However, achieving excellence in teaching and learning in a rural context remains a challenge for teachers and other sectors in a changing education system. The study describes the lived experiences of multi-grade teachers in rural schools and how they survive in their different multi-grade contexts. The research design was qualitative in nature, using case studies. Data were collected using observations and semi-structured interviews. The results revealed that teachers have varying perceptions of multi-grade teaching and do not have a clear understanding of the rationale behind multi-grade teaching. In addition, the findings from the data reflect that despite the challenges multi-grade teachers face they are able to find ways of using the little they have to enable teaching and learning to take place in their context. Multi-grade teachers practise useful strategies such as choosing similar topics and assessing learners in the same classroom according to their different grade levels. The study recommends that the teacher training curriculum integrates multi-grade teaching strategies as part of the initial teacher training, to enable teachers to deal with the realities that they face in multi-grade schools. In addition a well-coordinated support system at national, provincial, district and school level could help teachers cope with difficulties in their multi-grade classrooms.

INTRODUCTION

Multi-grade education is recognised as the optimum strategy and practice to reverse the current situation in rural education, so as to enable access, equity and quality of education in previously neglected areas (Report on the Generic Multi-grade Education policy (UNESCO 2010). In addition it aims to create an enabling environment where children in rural areas get a real chance to succeed in their primary education and go on to higher education and post-school education, enhancing the economic recovery of rural areas to become contributing assets in the national economy. Multi-grade teaching is a common practice around the world especially in the rural areas of developing countries, to provide access for children to universal primary education. Multi-grade teaching is part of the reality of rural area public schools and government-aided farm schools in South Africa (DoE 2005a).

According to Juvane (2005) most countries have a national curriculum that is prescribed for both urban and rural schools. He adds that the curriculum consists of learning competencies that are specifically designed for ordinary school situations and that the multi-grade educator finds

it difficult to make the content meaningful to learners. In South Africa, educators are using the Curriculum and Assessment Policies (CAPS) which is produced for mono-grade classrooms. Such a curriculum requires educators to plan separately for each grade. There is no provision for multi-grade classes. The Department of Basic Education (DBE) acknowledges that multi-grade schools exist in South Africa and that much needs to be done: however nothing has been done to support teachers who are teaching in multi-grade schools.

It should be pointed out that the curriculum used by teachers in multi-grade classrooms is silent on multi-grade teaching. Teachers are therefore left stranded in the classroom. Gardiner (2008: 60) contends that a decision needs to be taken about what model of schooling should shape and influence schooling in the rural areas, because the different contexts dictate the implementation pattern of the curriculum. No one curriculum is suitable for the entirety of the different teaching contexts. The Constitution (1996) and the South African Schools Act (1996) recognise the right of all South African children to have access to quality education. However, the reality is that quality is compromised in multi-grade schools since the teachers handling the

classes were never prepared for multi-grade teaching.

As Juvane (2010) has found, multi-grade teaching is often implemented as a necessity in African countries, rather than by design: to address a shortage of teachers, especially in rural, hard-to-reach areas with small school enrolments. This is also true for South Africa. Brown (2010) emphasises that in South Africa multi-grade schools are found mainly in the rural areas at both primary and secondary schools, although mostly at primary schools. Multi-grade teaching is also practised in developed countries such as the Netherlands and in England, not always as a necessity but rather as a pedagogical choice (Aksoy 2007).

Even though multi-grade teaching is prevalent in South African rural schools, little attention has been accorded to it by the DBE, teacher organisations and teacher training institutions. Currently teacher training institutions are not preparing and empowering teachers for the realities of the multi-grade classroom environment: hence teachers have a negative attitude towards the system. This is supported by Juvane (2007) and Brown (2010), who argue that pre-service and in-service education programmes for teachers do not address the curricular and instructional demands of multi-grade teaching, leaving educators unprepared for the challenges they will face in practice as multi-grade educators. Multi-grade teaching is a reality in South African schools. All the nine South African provinces have multi-grade schools. Brown (2010: 193) argues that multi-grade teaching is an under-researched area in South Africa and therefore it is not known how many schools nationwide are multi-grade. One could argue that the prevalence of multi-grade teaching is underestimated. Most of these schools are characterised by, among other things, lack of resources, insufficient classrooms, lack of water and sanitation facilities and unavailability of libraries for learners. In addition, the conditions in the schools are not conducive to either learning or teaching.

However the *Report of the Task Team for the Review of the Implementation of the Curriculum* (DBE 2009) acknowledges that no specific training has been provided for teachers to teach multi-grade classes and that there is a lack of policy guidance for these teachers. The task team recommends that research and support is needed for teachers in this context. Yet nothing has

been done to assist teachers who find themselves in the multi-grade classroom. Emanating from the above discussion, this study aims to investigate the experiences of primary teachers in implementing multi-grade teaching strategy in the rural schools in North West province. The study was guided by the question: How do primary teachers navigate in the multi-grade teaching contexts? The study conducted focused on analysing the existing practice of multi-grade teaching in South African schools and explored how teachers cope in their different multi-grade contexts.

Conceptualisation of Multi-grade Teaching

The concept of “multi-grade” is broad and there is no universally agreed-on definition among researchers about the nature of and the values to be reflected in multi-grade teaching. As a result, multi-grade teaching does not appear to enjoy a common interpretation among researchers and education practitioners. According to Wolff and Garcia (2000) multi-grade schools are common in rural areas throughout the world. They add that for the most part these schools are located in isolated, low-income rural areas and generally have untrained teachers. Multi-grade refers to the situation where different grades or levels of learners are taught by one teacher in the same classroom. A review of the literature confirms that multi-grade education may be an option to promote access to education, especially for children in rural areas (Berry 2010; Juvane 2007; Brown 2010).

Little (1995) defines multi-grade teaching as the teaching of students of different ages, grades and abilities in the same group. It is to be distinguished from “mono-grade” teaching in which students within the same grade are assumed to be more similar in terms of age and ability. It is also to be distinguished from multi-age-within-grade teaching, which occurs when there are wide variations in age within the same grade. According to Joubert (2007) multi-grade teaching is a setting where the teacher is responsible for teaching children of different grade levels at the same time.

Berry (2010) defines multi-grade teaching as “teaching which occurs within a graded system of education when a single class contains two or more student grade levels”. For the purpose of this paper the following definition of multi-

grade will be adopted: multi-grade teaching refers to “a situation in which one educator has to teach students of two or more grade levels during one time-tabled period usually in the same classroom” (Pridmore 2007: 141).

Theory Underpinning the Study

The conceptual framework within which the study is conducted is underpinned by the school effectiveness theory of Hopkins et al. (1996). According to this theory, the increased pressure for educational systems to attain results will always be there to meet the developing needs and demands of various stakeholder groups. Therefore school improvement, teacher development and school effectiveness will be at the centre of activities based on school development.

Hopkins et al. (1996) contend what is needed is a well-coordinated, cooperative style of working that gives individual teachers the confidence to “improvise” in search of the most appropriate responses to situations they find themselves in. Teachers in a multi-grade context have to develop appropriate teaching and learning materials and use the teaching methodologies needed for effective learning and teaching to take place. It should be pointed out that teachers can only “go the extra mile” if they are given support and encouragement by the Department of Education and their immediate supervisors, and by their principals and school heads of department. Schools practising multi-grade teaching need to build capacity for improvement by creating a framework for planning and supporting change. This is because each school has its unique priorities. It is those priorities that will drive the improvement of an individual school.

Furthermore, the creation of development opportunities for teachers will empower them and help them feel confident about multi-grade teaching, which is essential as teachers in those contexts must feel that they are supported. Hopkins et al. (1996) further suggest that work on conditions within the school has to complement the curriculum goals or other priorities the school has set itself. For example, adaptation of the multi-grade curriculum should be undertaken jointly by teachers, supported by curriculum experts working at national level. This will ensure that teachers do not feel isolated in their endeavour to make multi-grade teaching work in their classes.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study employs the interpretive paradigm. Interpretive research is not just the effortless collection of data but a working with data so as to reveal the essence of participants' experiences and their reasons for doing things the way they do (Henning et al. 2004). To this end, a rich, thick description was written interpreting the life experiences of the participants. As the objective of this enquiry was to describe and explain how teachers make sense of their multi-grade teaching context, a qualitative design was chosen. A qualitative approach attempts to understand human phenomena and investigates the meaning that people give to the events they experience (Henning et al. 2004).

The researcher purposefully selected participants that will best help her to understand the project and the research questions. Therefore, teachers who are currently teaching in multi-grade classes were selected to participate in the study. Since there are few teachers in multi-grade schools, only ten teachers were used in the study. As Patton (1990) indicates, the logic and power of purposive sampling lies in selection of “information-rich” cases for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research. Participants met the requirement of qualified teachers in line with the South African National Framework for Teacher Education and Training; neither of them were trained in multi-grade teaching.

The research method followed in my research was the case study: “a form of qualitative research focused on providing a detailed account of one or more cases” (Johnson and Christensen 2004). Two schools were selected to participate in the study. The selection of the school was purposeful as only schools which practise multi-grade were selected to participate in the study. The five schools chosen were poorly resourced with no sanitation facilities and electricity. Resources such as tables and chairs were also absent from the classrooms. These schools were 80 to 100 kilometres from the nearest town and the roads leading to the schools were in a dire condition. Teachers at these schools travel to school 100 kilometres every day, using public transport

that drops them off on the main road, following which they have to walk more than 10 to 15 kilometres to reach the school. In most cases they arrive at school after 09:00 due to lack of transport. Roads that lead to the school are not well maintained, especially during the rainy season. Most schools are situated in poverty-stricken villages where there are no roads, sanitation and resources such as clinics and churches. Many learners come from poor families where the main source of income is a government grant, (that is child grant and/or old age grant). One school has four classrooms and three teachers, with Grade R to Grade 6 classes. The other school has five classrooms with four teachers including the principal, catering for Grade R to Grade 6.

Data Collection Techniques

Semi-structured interviews were used as the primary data collection tool. This method is seen by the researcher as the appropriate method for data collection because it will give the participants an opportunity to respond to questions and ask questions to obtain clarity if they do not understand. Since questions are presented in the same way to all the participants, this will minimise the role and influence of the researcher and enable a more objective comparison of the results. To boost the credibility of the results classroom observation and a researcher's journal was used. The researcher's journal was used to record impressions during the interviews and details of the interactions between the researcher and the interviewees. Other documents such as the teacher's file and lesson plans were perused. Teachers were observed in their classroom. Classroom observation focused mainly on teaching methods and classroom management strategies. This is referred to as data triangulation, and it was done to validate the data from the participants.

Data Analysis

The interviews were first transcribed in detail and saved. In order to achieve a deep understanding of the lived experiences from the participants' viewpoint the data were systematically examined. Transcripts from the interviews, observation sessions and the journal were analysed and the codes and the categories were

determined and then formulated into themes. Data were categorised thematically.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical issues were considered during this research. Participants signed a consent form to participate in interviews and also to tape-record interviews. Participation was voluntary, which suggests that participants had a choice to withdraw from the study for any reason and at any time. Participants were assured that their responses would be treated with confidentiality.

FINDINGS

The data collected were consolidated and categorised into themes. Five themes were identified: conceptualisation of multi-grade, rationale for multi-grade, teaching strategies, lesson planning, and assessment

Conceptualisation of Multi-grade

The results of the study showed that a fundamental problem emanates from teachers' understanding of multi-grade teaching and how teaching should unfold in that context. They regard multi-grade teaching as no more than teaching two grades and did not take into account the different levels of learners in their classrooms, their age and their different abilities. The following quotes capture their views around what multi-grade means to them:

To me multi-grade teaching means you are teaching two grades in one class. I am not sure about this because I was never taught about this.

I believe it is teaching two grades, I do not know about this until I came to this school, so I am not even sure of what I am doing. I am just teaching, not knowing whether I am doing the right things or not.

The study revealed that teachers hold different conceptions of multi-grade teaching. They mentioned that they were never taught about multi-grade teaching, even in their initial teacher training programmes. Teachers did not know what was expected of them and their beliefs about teaching and learning were threatened as they were not confident about what they were doing. This could lower their morale and also diminish their self-worth as they no longer feel

that they are making a positive contribution to the lives of their learners.

Rationale for Multi-grade

When asked what they thought the reasons for multi-grade teaching were in their respective schools, the following quotes illustrate their answers:

I guess multi-grade is introduced because of shortage of teachers and fewer numbers of learners in a grade: I am not sure, just thinking.

I think we are in this situation because the principal is not doing anything about it: he must apply for a grant so that we get another teacher. I have been talking to him about this but it seems he is not interested because he is not teaching these learners.

The above quotes show that teachers are aware of the fact that multi-grade teaching is the result of the shortage of teachers. However one participant blames the principal for multi-grade, indicating that the principal did not want to apply for the grant. This shows that not all teachers are conversant with the rationale for multi-grade.

Teaching Strategies

Participants were asked about the teaching strategies that they employ in their teaching. The following quotes capture their responses to illustrate teaching strategies that they employ in their classrooms:

I divide each grade in a group, then I give each group some work to do. I will first concentrate on one group, and then go to the next group. The problem is that the other group will be making a noise. It is difficult for me to cope.

I choose one theme. There are themes that are similar and those that are different. I choose the theme that is similar for both grades, but it is not easy because most of the themes are different for different grades.

The results indicate participants believe that a single particular teaching method is appropriate for all the teaching contexts. The results showed that teachers use a group method and give learners different tasks in each group. However, they indicated that they cannot control the noise made by other groups when they are attending to one group. This shows that even though teachers are using group work to teach

in multi-grade classes, they do not know how to manage it. In addition, teachers indicated that it is not easy to choose the same themes for different grades. This could be because of the different curriculum that is used in each grade.

Lesson Planning

The observation results showed that teachers follow a mono-grade orientation in accordance with departmental expectations. In addition, the results showed that teachers use one lesson plan for different grades. Teachers indicated that they are overwhelmed by the amount of work that they have to do when teaching more grades, so they do not have time to prepare separate lessons. Participants indicated that they plan according to the guide provided by the Department of Education. However, this planning is geared towards mono-grade classes, not multi-grades. They were concerned that they have a heavy workload to prepare lesson plans.

Assessment

Assessment is an essential feature of the teaching and learning process and should be integrated into it on a continuous basis. This implies that assessment is an integral part of learning and teaching. It is used to determine whether the students' level of knowledge and performance accurately reflects the specific outcomes that the learning programme expects of them. When asked about how they conduct assessment in their classes, this is what they had to say:

When I assess, I look at the policy document and the learner's level and assess according to that. Even though the policy does not refer to multi-grade classes I adapt it to my situation. I use the same books that have been provided by the Department of Education, but it is difficult as they do not cater for multi-grade.

I always compile two assessments for the two grades that I am teaching. The assessment will be based on their level. For example for Grade R, I will assess them on "Myself" and for Grade 1 the assessment will be on "my body".

The above results showed that teachers are able to find their way around using the little they have to enable learning and teaching to take place. Teachers assess their learners according

to their grades. They indicated that they use the policy document to determine the level at which different learners should be assessed. They indicated that when they plan for assessment they develop their own assessment tools and instruments since they do not have those resources. It should be noted that in the mono-grade context, teachers are given assessment instruments and tools.

DISCUSSION

Multi-grade teaching has come as an attempt by the government to bring schools nearer to the communities so that all children can have access to education. However the quality of education these learners are receiving leaves much to be desired. The results indicated that teachers perceive multi-grade teaching differently: even the rationale for multi-grade teaching is not clear to them. For multi-grade teachers to be effective in their teaching tasks, they must be better trained (Lingam 2007; Mason and Burns 1997b). Chandra (2004) emphasises the need for ongoing professional development of teachers to enable them to teach effectively in their multi-grade contexts.

When planning a lesson, teachers are expected to consider appropriate methods that they can use to deliver the subject matter. The results indicate that teachers use a group method in their classrooms. It should be pointed out that different teaching methods need to be used to make teaching and learning effective. According to Berry (2010) teachers need to be taught how to plan across the objectives of grade levels or how to adjust the curriculum to make it suitable for their setting. Teachers do not use different teaching methods in their classrooms. Lingam (2007) finds that teaching in multi-grade classes is difficult when the teacher is unable to use methods appropriate for multi-grade teaching. It should be noted that group work was not used as a teaching strategy as learners were grouped according to their grades and they were not learning in groups. Studies on multi-grade teaching, as evidenced in the sections above, generally report the lack of preparedness of teachers for multi-grade settings (Mulryan-Kyne 2005; Lingam 2007; Little 2005). Teachers do not have the skills needed for multi-grade teaching. Teacher education programmes cannot continue a dominant focus on mono-grade teaching

while multi-grade teaching is practised in schools (Brown 2008: 49)

The primary purpose of assessment in the classroom is to assist teachers and learners to determine, monitor and improve performance. Teachers need to develop appropriate assessment tasks to determine learners' knowledge and understanding. The results showed that teachers design their own assessment instruments and tools since the textbooks they use are designed for mono-grade. This they do despite a lack of training on how to develop teaching materials for multi-grade classes.

It is worth pointing out that teachers, despite their circumstances, are doing something positive to manage the difficult situation that they find themselves in. Teachers indicated that they teach using the same theme and then assess learners differently according to their grades. This is termed as a differentiated curriculum. It allows learners to deal with general topics or themes, but with different learning tasks in terms of level of learner. Pridmore (2007) maintains that a differentiated curriculum means that the same general topic or theme is covered by all learners. Learners in each grade group engage in a learning task appropriate to their level of learning.

CONCLUSION

Multi-grade teaching is here to stay: therefore, the sooner the Department of Education does something about the reality of multi-grade teaching the better for all stakeholders who need to pay attention to how we can improve the quality of teaching and learning in multi-grade environments. Teachers in multi-grade schools need to be versatile and try to make learning meaningful and effective for their learners in their classrooms. This article described the lived experiences of multi-grade teachers in rural schools and how they survive in their different multi-grade contexts. The results showed that teachers have different perceptions of multi-grade teaching; this is an indication that multi-grade teaching is not understood by teachers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Emanating from the above discussion, the Department of Education needs to empower teachers by explaining the rationale for multi-

grade teaching. If teachers understand the rationale for multi-grade teaching, they will not view it as “alien” or as something imposed on them, but as an alternative system for ensuring that all learners receive quality education irrespective of their geographical context. In addition, teachers should be given sufficient support to enable them to carry out their duties effectively and adequately with regard to multi-grade teaching. Opportunities need to be created for teachers to feel more powerful and confident about their work in the face of the difficulties that individual teachers and the school itself always experience when there are changes in the education system. The teacher training curriculum needs to integrate multi-grade teaching strategies as part of the initial teacher training.

REFERENCES

- Aksoy N 2007. Multi-grade schools in Turkey: An overview. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 28(2): 218-228.
- Berry 2010. Multi-grade Teaching. Discussion document. From <<http://www.ioe.ac.uk>> (Retrieved on 12 November 2010).
- Brown BA 2008. Challenges in the use of multi-grade teaching to promote sustainable human development in South Africa. *Commonwealth Youth and Development Journal*, 6(2): 70-86.
- Brown BA 2010. Teachers' accounts of the usefulness of multi-grade teaching in promoting sustainable human-development related outcomes in rural South Africa. *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 36(1): 189-207.
- Chandra R 2004. Education for the 21st Century: Reflections on what is needed in Fiji. Address at the Fiji Institute for Educational Research Conference, 5th January, 2004. University of the South Pacific.
- Department of Education (DoE) 2005a. *Teachers for the Future: Meeting Teacher Shortage to Achieve Education for All*. Pretoria: Department of Education.
- DBE (Department of Basic Education) 2009. *Review of the Task Team for the Review of the Implementation of the National Curriculum Statement*. Final Report. Pretoria: Government Printers.
- Gardiner M 2008. *Education in Rural Areas: Issues in Education Policy No. 4*. Johannesburg: Centre of Education Policy Development (CEPD).
- Henning E, Van Rensburg W, Smit B 2004. *Finding Your Way in Qualitative Research*. Pretoria: Van Schaik.
- Hopkins D, Ainscow M, West M 1996. *Improving the Quality of Education for All*. London: David Fulton Publishers.
- Johnson B, Christensen L 2004. *Educational Research: Quantitative, Qualitative and Mixed Approaches*. 2nd Edition. Boston: Pearson.
- Joubert J 2007. Adapted/Adjusted Curriculum for Multi-graded Teaching in Africa: A Real Solution. From <<http://multigrade.ioe.ac.uk/bibliography/annotated%20bibliography%20H-M.doc>> (Retrieved on 25 April 2009).
- Juvane V 2005. Redefining the role of multi-grade teaching. Working document prepared for the Ministerial Seminar on Education for Rural People in Africa: Policy Lessons, Options and Priorities. Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, September 7-9, 2005.
- Juvane V 2007. Multigrade teaching can improve quality of primary education. Commonwealth Education. From <<http://www.thecommonwealth.org/news/160291/090307teaching.htm>> (Retrieved on 12 March 2011).
- Juvane V 2010. Southern African multigrade education. Paper presented for the South African multigrade education conference Cape Peninsula University of Technology, Wellington Campus.
- Lingam G 2007. Pedagogical practices: The case of multi-class teaching in Fiji primary schools. *Educational Research and Review*, 2(7): 186-192.
- Little A W 1995. Multi-grade Teaching - A Review of Research and Practice. Education Research, pp. 63. Serial No. 12. Overseas development Administration, London. From <<http://multigrade.ioe.ac.uk/fulltext/fulltextLittlereview.pdf>> (Retrieved on 22 May 2010).
- Mason DA, Burns R 1997. Reassessing the effects of combination classes. *Education Research and Evaluation*, 3(1): 1-53.
- Mulryan-Kyne C 2005. Teaching and learning in multi-grade classrooms: More questions than answers. *Oideas*, 51: 85-95.
- Mulryan Kyne C 2007. The preparation of teachers for multigrade teaching. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 23(4): 501-514.
- Patton MQ 1990. *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods*. Newbury: Cambridge University Press.
- Pridmore P 2007. *Adapting the Primary-School Curriculum for Multi-Grade Classes in Developing Countries: A Five-step Plan and an Agenda for Change*. Institute of Education, London: University of London.
- Republic of South Africa. 1996. *The South African Schools Act, 84 of 1996*. Pretoria: Government Printer.
- Republic of South Africa. 1996. *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa Act, 108 of 1996*. Pretoria: Government Printer.
- UNESCO 2010. *Report on Generic Multi-Grade Education Policy and Multi-Grade Implementation, Multi-grade Education Policy for Developing Countries: Guideline*. Paris: UNESCO.
- Wolff L, Garcia N 2000. Multi-grade Schools and Technology. From <<http://www.ioe.ac.uk/multigrade>> (Retrieved on 13 November 2011).