

Multi-grade Teaching: A Daunting Challenge for Rural Teachers

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ABSTRACT Multi-grade teaching schools form the most neglected sector of the education system around the globe. As an important policy option for providing access to education for learners in remote areas multi-grade teaching needs to be recognized as such and be given the attention it deserves. However, achieving excellence in teaching and learning in rural contexts remains a challenge for teachers and other sectors of the educational change endeavors. This article aims at investigating primary school teachers' challenges of multi-grade teaching strategy in South African rural schools. A qualitative inquiry was used in the study. Multi-grade teachers were purposefully selected to participate in the study. Data were obtained through interviews. The data collected were consolidated and categorised into themes. The findings from the data reflect that teachers found teaching in a multi-grade context challenging and difficult. They report that they feel isolated and uncertain about what is expected of them in conducting lessons in their multi-grade classrooms. This paper attempts to suggest strategies that could be used in the multi-grade classrooms to ensure that classroom instruction and classroom management are improved in multi-grade contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Multi-grade teaching exists in many African countries, such as Namibia, South Africa and Togo, and it is recognised as the optimum strategy and practice to reverse negative trends in rural education, and to enable access, equity and quality of education in previously neglected areas. Despite the prevalence of multi-grade teaching in many African countries, governments tend to focus on improving conventional schools, often leaving the development of multi-grade schools to local initiatives (Joubert 2010: 59). In most cases multi-grade schools are poorly developed, with no resources such as textbooks and libraries. This is the case with South Africa's multi-grade schools.

Decentralisation of the education system in South Africa has resulted in a shortage of teachers, especially in rural areas. When learner enrolment drops, the access teacher is moved to a school with higher enrolment. As a result, learners in rural areas are often left without teachers. Schools with multi-grade classes are generally found in remote, usually rural, areas where school enrolment figures are not perceived to justify the appointment of one teacher for each grade level. Due to an insufficient number of learners in particular grades, these schools do not qualify to get a teacher, which means that more than two grades must be taught by one teacher in the

same classroom. The curriculum that teachers are using in multi-grade classrooms is silent on multi-grade teaching. Teachers are left stranded. The report of the task team for the review of the implementation of the National Curriculum Statement (Department of Basic Education 2009: 60) indicates that no specific training has been provided for teachers teaching multi-grade classes, and that there is lack of policy guidance for these teachers. The task team recommended that research and support is needed for teachers teaching in the multi-grade context. However, little has been done in this regard. The Department of Education does not recognise "rural education" as a separate entity, it is grouped together with the mono-grade curriculum. Joubert (2010) states that

"The policy documents of South Africa's Department of Education make no mention of multi-grade schools. Curriculum, learning materials and the teacher training are all geared towards single-grade classrooms. As a result 30 percent of all schools in the primary education systems are essentially left to fend for themselves."

The multi-grade schools use the same curriculum, have the same conditions of service, the same national legislation and have the same policies as other public schools in the country. This suggests that the curriculum content, teaching and learning materials are geared for mono-

grade classes. It is against this background that the study was done to understand teachers' challenges on multi-grade teaching strategy in rural schools in South Africa. The study was guided by the question: What are the teachers' challenges of multi-grade teaching?

Pedagogical Approaches to Multi-grade Teaching

The evidence suggests that one of the most enduring approaches to teaching multi-grade classes is one in which one teacher instructs several grade levels at the same time (Juvane 2005). Students in multi-grade classes generally spend more time on individual seatwork than students in single-grade classes. To cater for this set up, teachers need to use a variety of teaching strategies to help learners learn in a multi-grade teaching context.

Furthermore, in multi-grade classes children get less direct instruction from their teacher, time-on-task is lower, and peer tutoring or across-grade grouping by ability are not used to any significant degree. Mulryan-Kyne (2005) found that instructional strategies are the key to improving the quality of teaching and learning in multi-grade classroom. The promotion of approaches that increase the level of student independence and cooperative group-work tend to be suggested. Mulryan-Kyne (2005) argues that the facilitator role ensures that time spent away from the teacher is spent productively. Three important strategies found to be effective in this regard are: Peer instruction, in which students act as teachers for each other, cooperative group-work, which involves small groups engaging in collaborative tasks, and individualised learning programmes that involve the student in self-study (Mulryan-Kyne 2005). The use of these strategies could ensure that learners benefit in this teaching/learning context.

Multi-grade a Paradigm Shift

Multi-grade teaching has made it imperative for a paradigm shift in the way teachers teach and the roles that they play. Mertens (1998: 70) defines a *paradigm* as "a way of looking at the world. It is composed of certain philosophical assumptions that guide and direct thinking and action". Arjun (1998: 21) defines *paradigm* as a philosophical scheme of thought or a theoreti-

cal formulation on a subject that relates to the set of concepts, categories, relationships, values and methods that are generally accepted by a community of practitioners at any given period of time. Both these researchers view a paradigm as philosophical. In addition to the need for appropriate resources, multi-grade teaching requires substantial changes in the mindset of educators and school principals. Birch and Lally (1995: 14) argue that the reasons for multi-grade teaching's continued disfavour should be attributed to the dominance of the present paradigm of schooling as encapsulated in the single-grade approach. A paradigm shift is required if multi-grade teaching is to escape the bonds of the present system and be allowed to become an authentic pedagogy in its own right.

Birch and Lally (1995: 14) maintain that a paradigm shift of the kind required would embrace the following:

- a. A substantive change in the philosophical, sociological, psychological and pedagogical base to education, which would recognise that there is theory other than that reflected in the developmental approach to schooling with its stages, readiness and concrete-abstract notions.
- b. The recognition of the heterogeneity of schools and classes more akin to family and community groupings than the forced and disruptive artificiality of homogeneous groupings on the basis of age. This perspective implies that effective multi-grade teaching demands new strategies, different from those for single-grade teaching.

Curriculum and Multi-grade Teaching

A considerable number of countries require all teaching to follow national curricula that are mono-graded. South Africa is no exception. Teachers have a responsibility to prepare and utilise materials that are oriented to the mono-grade context. This requirement places teachers in a multi-grade teaching context under severe pressure. There is no time available for teachers to design such curricula and to re-design national requirements to fit local contexts. Brown (2008: 20) emphasised that the application of a single-grade national teaching syllabus in the multi-grade teaching situation creates problems for multi-grade teaching. He indicates that such a syllabus generally

- a. is not structured for multi-grade teaching classes,
- b. places a heavier work-load on multi-grade teachers compared with their single-grade teaching counterparts,
- c. impedes the capacity of the multi-grade teachers, given the lack of facilities and problems of management at the local level, and
- d. does not allow for the time constraints placed on multi-grade teachers, given the preparation time required and the need to address a wider range of students' needs.

Brown (2008: 21) contends that a syllabus needs to be prepared specifically for the multi-grade teaching context or should be able to be adapted to it. The literature indicates that four curriculum adaptation strategies have been shown to be effective in multi-grade classrooms, and could be promoted during teacher training (Little 2001, 2005; Brown 2008), these are:

a. Multi-year Curriculum Spans

In this strategy, units of curriculum content are spread across two to three grades rather than one. All learners work through common topics and activities (Little 2005).

b. Differentiated Curricula

Differentiated curricula cover the same general topic/theme with all learners, and allow them to be engaged in learning tasks appropriate to their level of learning.

c. Quasi Mono-grade

The quasi mono-grade approach enables a teacher to teach grade groups in turn, as if they were mono-graded. The same or a different subject is taught at the same time, and teachers distribute time equally/unequally between grade groups, depending on the tasks they are doing.

d. Learner- and Materials-centred Approach

The fourth strategy depends more on the student and the learning materials than on teacher input (the curriculum is translated into self-study graded learning guides). Students work through these at their own speed with support from the teacher and structured assessment

tasks. Learning is constructed as involving a relationship between student, learning materials and teacher. This strategy allows the curriculum to be translated into self-study graded learning guides, and allows learners to work at their own speed with support from the teacher and structured assessment tasks.

According to Joubert (2007) the adjustment/adaptation of the curriculum should recognise the following: pupils may develop at different rates; more flexible approaches to student retention and promotion are needed; there should be a focus on learning outcomes rather than content; learner focused rather than teacher directed methods are beneficial; and teachers should be trained to be facilitators rather than keepers of knowledge.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study was located within the interpretive paradigm and a qualitative research design was utilised to obtain a detailed account of the teachers' perspectives in the use of a multi-grade strategy in their classrooms. This study follows a case study design. In a case study design, data collection and analysis focus on one phenomenon, which the researcher is trying to understand (McMillan and Schumacher 2006: 315).

Sampling

The researcher purposefully selects participants who will best help her to understand the phenomena under scrutiny 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 two teachers were used in the study. As Patton (1990: 169) indicated, the logic and power of purposive sampling lies in selection of "information-rich" cases for in-depth study. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research. All participants met the requirement of qualified teachers in line with the South African National Framework for Teacher Education and Training; none of them were trained in multi-grade teaching.

Two schools were selected to participate in the study. The selection of the school was purposeful as only schools that practise multi-grade

teaching could participate in the study. The selected sample has the characteristic of making it possible to generalise data to a setting in which there is a similar focus. The two schools chosen were poorly equipped, with no sanitation facilities or electricity. Resources such as tables and chairs were also absent. These schools were 150 to 200km from the town, and the roads leading to the schools were in dire condition. Teachers at these schools travel 110 km every day, using public transport that drops them off on the main road, from where they have to walk more than 10km to the school building. They often arrive late owing to lack of transport.

Data Collection Methods

The study used individual interviews to collect data from teachers who teach multi-grades. Cohen et al. (2007) see interviews as emotionally engaged social interactions about people's real experiences in constructing their personal accounts on a particular topic. The interviews were semi-structured to allow teachers some freedom to express their opinions and also to allow the researcher to probe emerging aspects. The interviews lasted approximately one hour each. Permission was obtained from the relevant district and school principals. Arrangements were made with each teacher for a time that was convenient for them.

Data Analysis

All individual interviews were recorded and transcribed. Qualitative methods were used to analyse the qualitative data from interviews and observations, using the thematic analysis approach. The analysis showed rich data and varied experiences, which gave insight into the teachers' perspectives on multi-grade teaching.

Ethical Consideration

Ethical aspects were considered during this research. Participants signed a consent form to participate in interviews and also for the interviews to be recorded. Participation was voluntary, which suggests that participants had the 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 following themes emerged during the analysis of the data, namely: teacher isolation, classroom management, grade combination and resources.

Teachers' Isolation

Teachers in multi-grade schools felt that they are left to fend for themselves in their school. The following views capture their comments:

The Department of Education does not care about us or what we are doing. Even when they organise workshops, it is not for us.

I am the only teacher practising multi-grade in this school, so when I have problems I have no one to talk to. Even the principal or the head of the department knows nothing about multi-grade. I am really struggling. It is not easy.

The above quotes suggest that teachers feel that they are isolated and neglected by the Department of Education. They also indicated that development workshops are designed for teachers in mono-grade schools and do not cater for them. This feeling of isolation could affect teachers' morale and, consequently, affect teaching and learning. In addition, teachers indicated that they do not get support from their colleagues in the teaching profession. It should be pointed out that these schools are seldom visited by subject specialists due to their geographical location and inaccessibility.

There is a debate regarding how much professional development is enough, what constitutes effective professional development, and what kind of professional development different teachers need. It is a fact that schools differ widely in their dynamics, organisation and population. Therefore, teachers' developmental needs are not the same. This implies that when a professional development programme is designed, the different contextual factors should be considered and multi-grade context is no exception.

Classroom Management

The results showed that teachers in multi-grade classrooms cannot manage their classrooms effectively, that is, they cannot manage

their learners, the task that they have to do and the time that they have to teach. Teachers said the following:

I am struggling with noise; when I am busy with one group, the other learners in another group are making noise. Even the colleagues are complaining about noise in my classroom, but what can I do?

Learners are very noisy, I don't know what to do, when I give them tasks, because I will be busy with the other group, they will make noise and not finish the work.

The results indicate that teachers feel powerless due to their inability to control the level of noise in their classrooms. It shows that teachers lack the necessary skills and expertise in managing their classrooms. In addition, teachers feel inadequate and this could affect teaching and learning. They might withdraw and feel that they are failing to execute their duties as teachers.

Grade Combination

Teachers indicated that grade combination is one of the problems that they are facing in multi-grade classes. More often than not, the combination of grades is done haphazardly without taking into consideration the different curricula for different grades. Here are teachers' views regarding grade combination:

Grade one and Grade R programmes are not the same, but these learners are in one classroom. How do I teach them? Grade R learners want to play and Grade one should be taught formally. These learners are taught differently. It also means I have to teach all subjects in both grades.

I am teaching Grade 3 and Grade 4. In both grades the language of learning is not the same. Grade three is taught in their home language and grade four are taught in English. I can't manage this situation.

Teachers indicated that Grade combinations especially Grade R and Grade one (different time allocation) is a serious problem as these learners learn differently. Grade R learners are expected to learn informally through play, whereas the Grade one learns formally. This creates a problem for teachers because the Grade R curriculum cannot be integrated with the Grade one curriculum. This is also a problem for Grade 3 and 4 learners, who use a different language of learning and teaching. In addition, teachers find it

difficult to teach different subjects across different grades. They need to know the content for all the grades and this could create a problem and even compromise effective teaching and learning.

Resources

Resources were one of the teachers' main concerns in their multi-grade classrooms. This is what they said regarding resources:

Learners do not have learning materials. The school does not have a photocopying machine for me to make copies for learners to learn.

Learners share books and they are not even enough for sharing. I do not give my learners homework because they do not have materials. Look at the grade one learner, no toys in the class for them to play with.

It is evident from the above responses that teachers are struggling with resources. Teachers in multi-grade classrooms do not have resources such as textbooks or even photocopying machines. This compromises teaching and learning and could make many lessons less than successful because inadequate and insufficient resources have been prepared by the teachers.

DISCUSSION

Multi-grade teaching should be perceived as an alternative system for ensuring that all learners receive quality education irrespective of their geographical context. The right to quality education is enshrined in the South Africa Constitution. The training of teachers in multi-grade schools is one other challenge of teacher development. This is a very controversial issue, since teacher learning occurs at various levels in diverse fields and contexts. The results indicated that teachers feel isolated and neglected by the Department of Education. These sentiments are shared by Ames (2004) that the isolated and isolating condition of work and poverty of the communities served by multi-grade schools reinforces teachers' negative attitude towards multi-grade teaching. Furthermore, the results of the study show that teachers are not prepared for the realities that they find in their classroom. Teachers just teach because that is what is expected of them. Studies on multi-grade teaching generally report the lack of prepared-

ness of teachers for multi-grade settings (Mulryan-Kyne 2005; Lingam 2007; Little 2005). Joubert (2007) indicates that in African countries, governments tend to focus on improving conventional schools, often leaving the development of multi-grade schools to local initiative, which quite often means workshops, and other ad hoc sessions. Pre-service and in-service education and training for teachers on the needs of the multi-grade class are vital (Little 2005). For multi-grade teachers to be effective in their teaching tasks, they must be better trained (Lingam 2007; Mason and Burns 1997). Chandra (2004) emphasised the need for ongoing professional development of teachers to enable them to teach effectively in their multi-grade contexts. Teacher education programmes cannot continue a dominant focus on mono-grade teaching while multi-grade teaching is practised in schools (Brown 2008: 49).

Classroom management entails managing tasks, learners, time and resources. How the teacher manages his/her classroom will determine the outcome of the teaching and learning process. In general, the literature suggests that teachers prefer single grades because multi-grade classes mean more planning, preparation, organisation and work, catering for a wider range of abilities and maturity, less time for meeting individual student needs and for remediation, less time for reflection on teaching, lack of relevant professional training, and less satisfaction with their work (Little 2005; Mason and Burns 1995). The results showed that teachers in multi-grade classroom cannot manage their classes effectively. Management is a vital task of the classroom teacher, and nowhere is this function more important than in the multi-grade classroom context (Titus 2004). The aim of classroom management is to plan, organise, lead and control the teaching and learning process in such a way that the learner will get maximum benefit from the process. Du Plessis et al. (2011: 144) argue that managing a classroom makes many demands on the teacher. They add that the teacher has to take full responsibility for the effective management of everything that happens in the classroom. Mulryan-Kyne (2005) states that one of the greatest challenges for the multi-grade teacher is the requirement to teach several grade levels in their multi-grade class with the same time allocation that is available for the single-grade teacher to teach one grade level. Teachers

in multi-grade teaching schools need to be very flexible in their management of classrooms to fit particular teaching situations, the physical environment and the composition of the class.

Grade combination is another concern for multi-grade teachers. Berry (2001: 569) contends that the conceptual skills requirements of the prescribed curriculum are too great for the teachers to cope with, creating the pressing problems and concerns that have to be addressed in the multi-grade teaching situation. Joubert (2010) shares the same sentiments, claiming that teachers in this context face a considerable hurdle in managing integration of different grades, given that they need to know much more of the content of primary education across two or more grades and in every subject area.

The dearth of curricula, curriculum resources and teaching materials for multi-grade teaching is a matter of frequent mention in the literature. However, too little attention has been given to providing multi-grade teaching teachers with appropriate resources. A key aspect in managing learning in a multi-grade classroom is the provision of appropriate resources. Resources form an integral part of successful teaching and learning in any teaching context. Teachers have to ensure that the learners in these classes are taught, which means that teachers need to improvise, using the mono-grade curriculum and adapting it to their teaching situation. Resources are often the lens through which learners view the learning area and the lesson (Coetzee et al. 2008: 81). Teachers in the multi-grade context need to be provided with resources if effective teaching and learning is to be attained.

CONCLUSION

Teachers' role is central to the effective teaching and learning in the multi-grade classroom. It is evident from the results that teachers are experiencing problems in dealing with multi-grade classes. This could be associated with lack of training and the unfavourable conditions in their situations. In addition, teachers feel isolated and unappreciated by the department of education since appropriate training is not provided. Teachers need to be equipped with pedagogy practices that are appropriate for multi-grade classes such as peer teaching and integrating related concepts of the grades that they teach to accommodate all learners in the classroom.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There is a need to address both the education and support of multi-grade teachers if multi-grade teaching is to be a viable option in attempts to provide quality education in this teaching and learning context. This paper recommends that to ensure that teachers manage their multi-grade classes effectively, there should be clear guidelines on which phases and grades should be grouped together. For example, Grade one and Grade two can be grouped together because they follow the same curriculum. But Grade one cannot be grouped with Grade R, which follows a different curriculum. South Africa in particular, needs first to recognise multi-grade teaching as a practice, and support teaching in such classes. If children are to learn effectively in multi-grade settings, teachers need to be well trained, well resourced and hold positive attitudes to multi-grade teaching.

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