

Multi-grade Teaching and Quality of Education in South African Rural Schools: Educators' Experiences

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ABSTRACT This paper reports on an investigation into the experiences of educators in Multi-grade teaching in rural schools. The study employed the qualitative approach of data collection, using observations and interviews. The findings suggest that in South Africa there is no curriculum differentiation between multi-grade and mono-grade classes, as such all learners use similar textbooks regardless. In addition, the national curriculum is graded and lacks both flexibility and integration. Absence of training of multi-grade teaching educators was another problem identified: only mono-grade educators are currently receiving attention with an assumption that such educators will automatically be able to teach in multi-grade schools. Further, educators believe that the lack of human and physical resources compromises the delivery of quality education. Also, the lack of support for educators seems to be the main problem in the implementation of the multi-grade strategy in classrooms. Multi-grade teaching is also hampered by the fact that many educators do not like to live and work in rural areas, where multi-grade teaching is mainly practiced. The study recommends the implementation of policies that recognises and supports multi-grade teaching in different contexts so that multi-grade pedagogy is understood and accepted by all.

1. INTRODUCTION

Angela Little who has written extensively on multi-grade teaching maintains that despite its prevalence in many educational systems, multi-grade teaching remains invisible, and she contends that the needs of multi-grade teachers, classes and schools must be addressed. Little (2001: 481) says,

“An active commitment must be made to removing educational disparities. Underserved groups—the poor; street and working children; rural and remote populations; nomads and migrant workers; indigenous peoples; ethnic, racial and linguistic minorities; refugees; those displaced by war; and people under occupation—should not suffer any discrimination in access to learning opportunities.”

There is no universally agreed upon definition of multi-grade teaching among researchers. Brown (2008: 4) indicates that multi-grade teaching does not appear to enjoy common in-

terpretation among researchers and education practitioners. This suggests that multi-grade teaching is interpreted differently by different researchers. Berry (2010: 1) 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). Multi-grade teaching approach of education is receiving attention as a model that can provide viable opportunity for educational delivery in remote rural areas. Juvane (2007) contends that multi-grade teaching has the potential to improve the quality of teaching.

Berry (2001) maintains that multi-grade schools are particularly effective at promoting the reading progress of low achieving students, partly because of differences in the approach to instruction in multi-grade and mono-grade classrooms. Berry argues that mono-grade classrooms are characterised by undifferentiated whole-class teaching; however, in multi-grade classes students have more opportunity to engage in small-group work (Berry 2001: 357-552). Multi-grade teaching is seen “as an ‘inevitable’ practice that arises through limited number of pupils and classrooms in small and

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scattered settlement areas where population density is low and is perceived as a system that needs to be abolished” (Aksoy 2007: 218).

Multi-grade teaching is a widespread practice, especially in the rural areas of developing countries, to provide access for children to universal primary education. Palitza (2010) indicates that in South Africa 30% of primary school children attend multi grade classes which are taught by single educators. Multi-grade teaching is mainly used because of a shortage of teachers and also of physical resources. For example, as Little (2001) suggests, schools in which the official number of teachers deployed justifies mono-grade teaching but where the actual number deployed is less. The inadequate deployment arises for a number of reasons including low teacher supply, teachers who are posted to a school but who do not report for duty, or teachers on medical or casual leave (Little 2001).

However, in developed countries multi-grade teaching is not always a necessity but is regarded as one of pedagogical choices (Aksoy 2007). Even if they exist as a necessity, there are sufficient educational resources there. The above notion suggests that authors should be careful when comparison is made between the status of multi-grade and mono-grade schools, in different countries with different contexts.

It should be noted that multi-grade teaching is a common practice in most African countries such as Botswana, Uganda, Zambia to name but a few (Brown 2010). This is also true for South Africa. Brown (2010: 123) indicates that in South Africa multi-grade schools are found mainly in the rural areas and multi grade teaching practised both at the primary and secondary schools levels; but the bulk of cases are at the primary level (Brown 2010: 123). The implications are that if learners, who did not attain quality education in primary schools due to multi-grade teaching, would get into secondary education institutions without proper grounding in education. This in turn has implications on their access and success in the institutions of higher learning.

The South African Constitution declares the rights of children to education. To this end the Department of Education (DoE) has committed itself to ensuring that the number of learners enrolled at primary school increased to 85% by 2015 (DoE 2005). This endeavour is in itself a good thing; however appropriate measures need

to be put in place to ensure that these learners receive quality education even in multi-grade classes. It should be mentioned that achieving excellence in teaching and learning in a rural context remains a challenge for educators and other sectors of the educational change endeavours. As Juvane and Joubert (2010: 3) has found, multi-grade is often implemented as a necessity, rather than by design to address educator shortage especially in rural, hard-to-reach areas with small school enrolments. They add that multi-grade teaching maximises the use of scarce educational resources, assists countries to achieve Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Education For All (EFA) goals and to address educator absenteeism particularly in the context of HIV/AIDS epidemic impact. It should be emphasised that the MDGs and EFA goals will not be reached if multi-grade teaching does not get the attention it deserves from curriculum planners and the education sector as a whole.

Much as multi-grade teaching, as an innovative strategy to deliver education in areas that are not easily accessible, is imperative in the development of education in South Africa in the 21st century, it also faces numerous challenges. Pre-service and in-service educator education programmes 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 (Juvane 2007; Brown 2010). The assumption is that they will adapt the curriculum to suit the circumstances. However, educators need specialised skills to be able to adapt the curriculum. In most instances, they are left stranded with no support from the Department of Education. This lowers educators’ morale and thus affects their performance (Juvane 2007; Brown 2010).

A review of the literature confirms that multi-grade education may be an option to promote access to education, especially to children in rural areas (Berry 2010; Juvane 2007; Brown 2010). As Brown (2010: 193) indicates, “multi-grade teaching is an under-researched area in South Africa and as such the number of schools with this practice nationwide is unknown.” The study conducted focused on analysing the existing practice of multi-grade teaching in South African schools and attempts to suggest strategies that could be used in the multi-grade classroom to ensure that classroom instruction and

classroom management are improved in the multi-grade context. In addition, the study could assist in raising awareness of the importance of multi-grade pedagogy.

Following this background of multi-grade teaching in South African schools, is a brief literature review, an explanation of the methodology used, and the presentation and analysis of the results of the study. The paper concludes with a discussion and recommendations for addressing the challenges faced by multi-grade educators.

1.1 Theoretical Frameworks of Multi-grade Teaching

The study is underpinned by Multi-grade Teaching Theory. The following section draws mainly from Little (2001). Under what she calls “terms and conditions of multi-grade teaching”, Little (2001: 481) discusses problems experienced by teachers in such schools. She maintains,

“In multi-grade teaching, teachers have to work within a stipulated timetable for instruction across two or more curriculum grades. In ‘one-teacher’ schools, the teacher is responsible for teaching across five or six grades of the curriculum. In two or three-teacher schools the teacher is responsible for teaching across two or more curriculum grades.

In mono-grade teaching, by contrast, teachers are responsible, within a timetabled period, for instruction of a single curriculum grade. In many mono-grade classes, teachers teach the same content at the same time to all children; in others, teachers group children according to their levels of achievement. Despite the achievement differentiation, students are regarded, for curriculum and school organisation purposes, as enrolled in the same curriculum grade of schooling” (Little 2001: 481).

In addition, she succinctly explains the conditions under which multi-grade teaching takes place. These include:

- (i) Schools in areas of population decline, where previously there was mono-grade teaching, and where, now, only a small number of teachers are employed in the schools, necessitating multi-grade teaching;
- (ii) Schools in areas of population growth and school expansion, where enrolments in the expanding upper grades remain small;

- (iii) Schools in areas where parents send their children to more popular schools within reasonable travel distance, leading to a decline in the number of students and teachers in the less popular school;
- (iv) Schools in which the official number of teachers deployed justify mono-grade teaching but where the actual number deployed is less. The inadequate deployment arises for a number of reasons including low teacher supply, teachers who are posted to a school but who do not report for duty, or teachers on medical or casual leave;
- (v) Schools in areas of low population density where schools are widely scattered and inaccessible and enrolments low;
- (vi) Schools that comprise a cluster of classrooms in different locations, in which some classes are multi-grade for the same reasons as (i), and some are mono-grade;
- (vii) Schools in which the number of students admitted to a class comprises more than one ‘class group’, necessitating a combination of some of them with students in a class group of a different grade;
- (viii) Schools in which teachers have decided, for pedagogic reasons, to organise students in multi-grade rather than mono-grade groups, often as part of a more general reform of the education system
- (ix) Schools in which teacher absenteeism is high and ‘supplementary teacher’ arrangements are non-effective or non-existent; (Little 2001: 481).

According to Juvane and Joubert (2010), a paradigm change is required if multi-grade education is to escape the bonds of the present system and be allowed the freedom to exist as an authentic pedagogy in its own right. Multi-grade teaching as a pedagogy is seen as a low class and undesirable option. According to Juvane (2010), there is a perception that multi-grade teaching is a temporary stop-gap measure, to be replaced by ‘normal’ teaching as soon as possible. This is also emphasised by Mulryan-Kyne (2007) that multi-grade schools, especially in developing countries, are poorly resourced and the attitudes of educators themselves, administrators, parents and pupils towards Multi-grade teaching are often negative. This suggests multi-grade is seen as a non-sustainable form of education that is designed to address a particular

need at that time. One could argue that there is a need for policy makers, parents, and educators to change their perception regarding multi-grade teaching. Juvane (2005: 10) argues that the development of positive attitude among educators, parents and education officers will create an understanding of the value of multi-grade teaching as a pedagogy that promotes quality than seeing it as an inferior and cheap option. It should be mentioned that educators' positive attitudes towards multi-grade is crucial in ensuring that multi-grade teaching is a success in schools. Educators are the important agents in the education sector.

Joubert (2009) indicates that policy documents of the Department of Education (DoE) make no mention of multi-grades schools. In other words, there is no policy on multi-grade education in South Africa. It should be pointed out that multi-grade schools, their educators and their learners are dealt with in the same manner as if they were mono-grade schools, or belonging to mono-grade schools. Curriculums, learning materials and educator training are all geared towards the single-grade classroom. The reality of the matter is that multi-grade classes do exist. Therefore it is imperative for the DoE to provide educators with a curriculum specially designed for multi-grade teaching, and to regard multi-grade teaching as an important strategy that can improve the quality of teaching and learning in the country.

1.1.1 Curriculum Reform

Curriculum reform is a central constituent in the improvement of educational quality. Therefore, multi-grade teaching can be made effective through curriculum reform. Curriculum reforms are taking place around the globe, both in developing and developed countries. It should be pointed out that educational reform in South Africa has made improvements in the school system; however, the public schooling system has failed many young South Africans. This is true for educators and learners in multi-grade contexts.

According to Juvane (2005: 10), most countries have a national curriculum that is prescribed the same for both urban and rural schools. He adds that the curriculum consists of learning competencies that are specifically designed for regular school situations and the

multi-grade educator finds it difficult to make the content meaningful to pupils. Thus educators are using the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) 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; therefore educators are forced to make double planning for each subject. This could be a time consuming exercise on the part of the educator and could also lead to ineffective teaching. Educators are expected to teach a diverse group of learners who have diverse learning needs. This would require educators to have a variety of teaching strategies to enable them to function effectively in their classrooms. As Berry (2010) stated, need to be taught how to plan across grade levels objectives or how to adjust the curriculum to make it suitable to their setting.

1.1.2 Teaching Strategies for Successful Multi-grade Teaching

Jacobs et al. (2011: 337) argue that no matter where teaching and learning occur, the educator has the responsibility to create an environment that is conducive to effective learning and free of disruptive behaviour. This can only be achieved if the educator has a repertoire of classroom management skills.

The whole-class teaching approaches associated with mono-grade classrooms do not favour low-achieving students. However, opportunities for heterogeneous group-work in multi-grade classrooms seem to assist low achievers, and they are seen as less beneficial for high achievers. There is need to adopt approaches to teaching which will address the needs of all levels of achievement in primary classrooms. Three possibilities are proposed and these are: cooperative group-work, differentiated whole-class teaching and peer tutoring (Berry 2001).

1.1.3 Peer Instruction

In this strategy the learners act as educators of other learners. Peer instruction engages students during class through activities that require each student to apply the core concepts being presented, and then to explain those concepts to their fellow students. This will promote sharing of knowledge thus promoting meaningful

engagement among learners in the classroom. It should be pointed out that an educator can make peer teaching a vibrant element of classroom interaction by giving learners a challenging question to discuss in the class. Learners who have leadership capabilities could be asked to lead discussions in the class.

1.1.4 Cooperative Group-work

Cooperative learning can be defined as the way of teaching in which learners work together to ensure that all members in their groups have learnt and assimilated the same content (Gawe et al. 2011: 197). In this strategy a small group of learners are engaged in a collaborative task. It should be mentioned that this strategy promotes accountability among learners as they are responsible for making sure that learning is taking place and they assist their fellow group members to achieve a common goal. However, for this strategy to work the educator must believe in the value of cooperative learning.

Cohen (1994) contends that cooperative group-work occurs when students work together in a group which is small enough for each learner to participate in a clearly assigned collective task, usually independently of the educator. In the same vein Berry (2001) stresses that this approach is regarded as a useful strategy in both multi-grade and mono-grade classrooms because it can allow the educator to assign work to groups of students in the knowledge that they will then be able to work productively. He refers to reciprocal teaching as one example of a cooperative group-work strategy.

1.1.5 Differentiated Whole-class Teaching

The whole-class teaching technique is criticized for it not being targeted at the different levels of achievement in the class. There is need for the whole-class teaching to be made more sensitive to a range of student needs (Miller 1991). Berry, proposes that shared reading can be regarded as one example of a potentially useful whole-class teaching strategy where the educator reads together with the students from a large-format book and asks questions at a level appropriate to the range of achievement in the class (Berry 2001; DfEE 1998). To this effect, educators can develop materials for shared reading by transcribing popular books onto large

sheets of newsprint paper (Berry 2001; Holdaway 1979).

1.1.6 Individualised Work

This involves learners studying on their own. Learners are given tasks to complete on their own to test their competences. Therefore, the educator must provide learners with opportunities to develop some sense of responsibility for their own learning. This does not mean that the educator takes a laissez-faire approach to teaching, but directs students learning through interactions in discussion groups.

It should be indicated that the above strategies can only be effective when educators are trained and supported in teaching in multi-grade classrooms. Berry (2010; 4) further indicates that the above strategies could increase students' level of independence and cooperative group work.

1.2 Research Questions

The study was guided by the following questions:

1. What pedagogic strategies do educators use in multi-grade teaching?
2. How do educators implement multi-grade teaching in their classrooms?
3. Why do they implement multi-grade teaching the way they do?
4. Is there any link between multi-grade teaching and quality education?

2. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

Researchers are located within interpretive paradigm which is in agreement with Neuman (2006: 88) who argues that interpretive researcher's goal is to develop an understanding of social life and discover how people construct meaning in natural settings. Babbie and Mouton (2001: 28) emphasized that all human beings are engaged in the process of making sense of their worlds and continuously interpret, create, give meaning, define, justify and rationalise daily actions. The study adopted a qualitative research approach to facilitate entry into the participants' life-world and to explore their life-experiences with a view to understanding the phenomena from the participants' perspective. The main focus of this study was to explore edu-

cators' experiences of multi-grade teaching pedagogy. A case study of four schools was used with the aim of capturing cases in their uniqueness. The case-study design was deemed the most appropriate as it allows the researchers to probe the participants in the process of data collection. In this study researchers studied four case study schools in detail in order to obtain a complete understanding of the phenomena under study. These were two schools in North-West province and two schools in Northern Cape Province. Although case studies have limited empirical generalisability, they have significant potential for theory development and for extending the power of analytic generalisation (Babbie and Mouton 2001).

2.1 Sampling

Four multi-grade schools were purposefully selected from public schools in rural North West province and two schools from Northern Cape Province - two schools in each province. Ten educators participated in the study (that is, 5 teachers from each province). This was a purposive sample as the researchers purposefully selected participants that would best help them to understand the subject of the study and the research questions. Educators who were teaching multi-grade classes were selected.

2.2 Data Collection Methods

Two data collection methods were used, namely observations and interviews and observations were foregrounded. Observations were done over a period of four months in identified schools. Observations were used because behavior observed could be recorded as it occurs naturally. An observation sheet was used to ensure that the researcher observed same things in different schools, for example, how educators conduct their lessons and how they manage their classrooms.

Coupled with observation were interviews. According to De Vos, Strydom, Fouché and Delpont (2011: 342), interview is regarded as a social relationship designed to exchange information between the participant and the researcher. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with educators teaching multi-grade classes. The goal of the interviews was to obtain more in-depth information about the edu-

cators' experiences of multi-grade teaching. The researcher asked the participants questions that are related to their opinions about multi-grade teaching. In addition, semi-structured interviews are more flexible and enable the researcher to be able to make a follow up on interesting avenues that emerged during the interview. Interview schedule containing open-ended questions were used. Open-ended questions were used to enable the participants to express themselves freely during the interviews. An interview schedule was drawn up to focus questions on what is important and needed to be addressed with regard to the experiences of the educators regarding the use of multi-grade strategy in their classrooms, and more importantly, to prevent the omission of important information during the interview.

2.3 Data Analysis

After data was collected, it was analysed and interpreted. Analysis of the data was done parallel with the process of data collection. In this study coding was used to analyse all the data obtained during the interviews and observations. The researcher first coded the data into different categories per question. Due to the large amount of data received, data reduction had to be performed and data was displayed by means of themes, whereupon conclusions were drawn (Wiersma 1995).

2.4 Ethical Considerations

All due ethical consideration were honoured. Permission to conduct research was sought from the respective authorities in both provinces and from the target schools. The informed consent of the participants was sought and they were given the normal guarantees regarding privacy and the right to withdraw from the study if a need arises. Anonymity and voluntary participation was also encouraged.

3. RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The use of respondents' voice in research is always very powerful and it is for this reason that selections from the transcripts of interviews have been used to ensure that educators' voices are heard, both of those who believe multi-grade

teaching can lead to quality education and also those who believe that there is no link between the two. This section presents the themes that emerged from the data analysis, which are follows:

- a. Problems associated with multi-grade teaching
- b. Multi-grade teaching and quality education
- c. Educator training and qualifications
- d. Classroom (time) management and multi-grade teaching
- e. Educators experiences of implementing multi-grade teaching

3.1 Problems Associated with Multi-grade Teaching

Educators were asked about their views regarding multi-grade teaching. Their views are presented below:

I don't like this approach; it frustrates us because no one cares about us. They concentrate on people who are teaching normal school not in multi-grade and they expect same things and this....is very frustrating as we cannot cope (North West educator 5)

The frustration of the educator above is due to lack of support for multi-grade educators. In authors' own experiences also, while much support and attention is given to the development of mono-grade teachers; not enough support is provided for the multi-grade teachers. For example observations revealed that educators were ill-prepared to teach in multi-grade classes.

Multi-grade is a challenge. Even though the number of learners in a class is manageable different grades in class is a challenge (North West educator 3)

Educators were observed not to be conversant with lesson planning required for multi-grade teaching - planning done by educators did not incorporate the different grades to be taught in the classroom.

There is nothing that I like about multi-grade I wish they can close these schools (North West educator 1)

It should be noted from the above responses that educators perceive multi-grade teaching as a temporary situation and that they expect things to return to normal. A lack of commitment on the part of educators in the pedagogy is also evident, as they feel it is not a normal practice. Until educators perceive this pedagogy as an

alternative pedagogy that could assist in ensuring that all learners are given the opportunity to learn, this pedagogy will remain a monster to many educators. Educators felt that they have been neglected by the DoE because focus is on educators teaching mono grades and the multi-grades educators are left out.

They also indicated that the multi-grade schools should be closed. This shows that educators do not see the value of multi-grade teaching and they are not comfortable with the pedagogy. This could be attributed to the fact that educators were not trained to use this strategy in the classrooms.

Educators were asked about the kind of support they would like to see made available for them. Their responses can be summed up in the following utterances:

I don't recommend multi-grade teaching... The government must give us more educators.... multi-grade is not good I feel that if we can get more educators that might help...How to handle, the strategy, how to handle multi-grade... I teach but I do not know if am in the right track (North West educator 1)

The above comments showed that educators suggest that the department of education should provide more educators to assist them with problems that they are experiencing. One could therefore conclude that educators do not understand the rationale for multi-grade in their school and still believe that the government does not want to supply educators in their schools.

Findings in this study suggest that educators would like to be assisted with teaching instruction in the classroom. There is feeling of confusion as they do not know if they are doing what is expected of them. As Mulryan-Kyne (2007: 504) contends, "there is a clear need to address both the education and support for multi-grade educators if multi-grade teaching is to be a viable option to provide quality education in the teaching and learning context." She adds that a lack of support for educators in this sector of education could result in failure of such schools to provide proper education to learners. It is imperative that the government needs to recognise multi-grade teaching and devise means to support the schools.

Many of the rural schools, which are mostly located in poor and isolated areas, have to practise multi-grade teaching. Problems of multi-grade teaching are not different from those of

rural schools but when rural schools have to practice multi-grade teaching the scale of the problems is heightened. Furthermore, the educators in remote rural schools are not only involved with teaching but also have to carry out lots of administrative work. Many educators teaching in multi-grade schools in rural areas see it as a forced exile because of the political, economic, geographical, social and cultural structure reasons (Aksoy 2007).

In many developing countries educators do not want to work and live in these rural remote schools for years – but as soon as they complete their obligatory service period, they tend to leave for better areas and countries (Aksoy 2007). In South Africa, to compensate and provide adequate numbers of educators in rural areas, a bursary scheme has been set which contributes to the training of educators such that once the training is completed the educators will be deployed into a rural area in her hometown. This is a way of ensuring that rural schools attract and retain properly qualified educators. Under this scheme, an educator will have to serve the school for a period equal to the number of years for which funding was granted.

3.2 Multi-grade Teaching and Quality Education

The Department of Education (2007) believes in the delivery of quality education for all learners. In order to gauge the views of educators in this regard, participants were asked the following question: What is your view on multi-grade teaching and the delivery of quality education? Educators do not believe that quality education can be achieved as long as there is still multi-grade teaching due to lack human resources in the schools. Another educator said,

I don't think I can be as optimistic as they are because I can be the best leader of my school, but with the lack of human resources at the school we will always have this multi-grade, multi-phase classes and that has a much more negative impact on the delivery of qualityI cannot think of quality education in my school...Maybe at bigger schools where they do have bigger SMT's and deputy principals, and enough educators maybe there it can work yes... Anybody can understand that an educator who has to teach for grade 1, 2 and 3...Grade ones need a lot of time to spend with by the educator

in order to understand what is being taught. The quality of education in that classroom cannot be the same as the school where the grade ones have a separate class. We do not have so many problems with physical resources – it is mainly human resources....our school is well equipped but we don't have enough educators. In our school we have Grade 1's and Grade 7's in the same class (Northern Cape educator 1)

The principals of the schools with multi-grade classes are overloaded because in addition to their jobs as principals, they have to teach, do administration work, provide transport for educators and community and their cars serve as community ambulances. Observations of classes also confirmed this above educator's view. The researchers observed that in all the two schools that were visited in North West Province, resources such as chairs and tables were not available despite the small number of learners (ranging from 15-25) in the classroom. In the Northern Cape the situation was different. While most schools had better and adequate physical resources; there was a huge shortage of human resources (educators and administrative staff). The above views are corroborated by Berry (2010) who mentions that multi-grade education often takes place in remote schools in difficult areas to reach, where educators do not only face the difficulties of dealing with a multi-grade organised class, but also other constraints such as lack of both physical and human resources, lack of supervision and poor teaching conditions. It was also observed that educators do one lesson plan for the different grades that they teach. This shows that educators did not know how to plan for the different grades that they rare teaching. The observations also indicate that classroom management in multi grade is problematic. Educators find it challenging to manage different grades at the same time. All the above problems compromise the delivery of quality education.

Another educator contended,

The shortage of educators becomes a barrier in delivering quality education, yet the Department of Education claims that educators must give learners special attention. For quality education to be delivered a sufficient number of qualified educators need to be employed and they must be enthusiastic, passionate, lifelong learners and researchers, who do not only have to solely rely on textbooks when teaching, but to be creative (Northern Cape educator 4)

If good quality education is to be delivered, properly qualified educators, who are enthusiastic and passionate about their work, are needed. In order to have quality education prevail in South Africa, there is a need for more 'democratic professionals' (Davies, Harber and Schweisfurth 2002).

3.3 Educator Training and Qualifications

When asked about the training that they received to teach in multi-grade classes, the following were some of the educators' comments.

We attended similar workshops designed for normal grades [mono-grade]....but we have never been trained in multi-grade teaching (North West educator 1)

Another principal contended that training is the prerequisite for the delivery of quality education

If the principal is well equipped, together the staff is also well equipped, then I think quality education will be delivered to the community and the learners...educators must be trained to teach in multi-grade schools (Northern Cape educator 2)

The above contention emphasises the fact for training as a prerequisite for effective delivery of multi-grade teaching. Another educator maintained that principals should be motivational to their educators who teach multi-grade classes. He said,

Principals should endeavour to motivate their staff...due to workloads and job-related stress most educators become demotivated....if the educators are motivated, learners become motivated, then quality education is delivered....If the educators are enthusiastic about what they are doing then the culture of learning will come back to the learners....They will see this guy is doing this thing with passion, not just doing textbook teaching. Then quality education will definitely be delivered (Northern Cape educator 5).

Training is imperative to ensure that educators are informed of the current developments in the education sector, but most educators suggest they were never trained to teach multi-grade classes.

We were never called for training; I don't know what they expect us to do...I think according to them we do not need training in multi-grade they will train us for other things but multi-grade teaching (North West educator 3)

The above responses indicate that the Department of Education is providing training for educators except educators in multi-grade schools. The results also reflect that educators did not receive training in teaching multi-grade classes and this is a problem as they are expected to teach the learners in multi-grade classes. It is also true that educators who were not trained in multi-grade teaching would find it difficult to teach effectively in such settings.

The educator is the key factor in the determination of the success of multi-grade teaching as such there is need for special educator training for multi-grade teaching. Studies suggest that in many countries, it is difficult to attract trained and qualified educators to multi-grade schools (Bray 1987; Little 1995; Rowley 1992). In South Africa the situation is different-authors are also not aware of any training specifically designed for multi-grade teaching – only mono-grade educators are currently receiving attention with an assumption that such educators will automatically be able to teach in multi-grade schools. This partly accounts for the fact that there is limited evidence of differences between instructional practices in multi-grade and mono-grade classrooms (Berry 2001).

However, it is believed that mono-grade classrooms are characterised by a reliance on educator-directed teaching methods, with little opportunity for student participation, and limited differentiation (Berry 2001; Department of Education 1995; Hilsun, Berry and Murgatroyd 1998). In multi-grade schools, however, students have more opportunity to work together in small mixed-ability groups. This is because while the educator is directing instruction at one grade level group, the others are working independently of the educator.

3.4 Classroom (time) Management and Multi-grade Teaching

When asked about the nature of curriculum and time required to complete the syllabus in the multi-grade class this is what they had to say:

I can't make the required hours....We do not cover the hours we are supposed to cover in each grade.We cannot finish our work on a specified time.....Learners are not getting enough time of teaching. (North West educator 4)

None of the educators mention a curriculum different from the national curriculum which suggests that multi-grade schools teach the very same national curriculum as in mono-grade schools. The above statements show that educators are not happy with the amount of time they spend teaching learners in multi-grade classes. Educators indicated that they use the same amount of time to teach different grades in a class than one would use to teach just one grade. It is imperative to mention that educators are using the South African National Curriculum Statement (NCS) which is the curriculum used by mono-grade schools. This creates problem as the curriculum is not structured in a way that it could accommodate multi-grade teaching situations. However, this calls for training in time management for educators who teach in multi-grade schools.

Classroom management was another problem observed in regards to multi-grade teaching. It was observed that while the educator was busy with one group the other group would be busy with a task to complete. This task will then be completed without the educator's input or supervision. In most instances the learners did not even complete the tasks assigned to them. The educators did not even ask learners about the task, as it was used solely to keep them busy while the educator was teaching the other group. This could be attributed to lack of proper planning on the part of the educators. In addition, planning done by educators did not incorporate the different grades to be taught in the classroom. Lack of classroom management skills is emphasised by Joubert (2009) who contends that workload pressure and time management remains a challenging factor for multi-grade educators. Educators have to design holding activities that could be used by one group when the educator is busy with the other group. This has proven to be problematic as the other group of learners will have to do the task without the educator's supervision and support.

In South Africa there is no set multi-grade teaching curriculum but learners taught under multi-grade teaching have to be taught within the confines of the national curriculum of mono-grade schooling. Multi-grade teaching learners use the same textbooks used in mono-grade classes. In many countries including South Africa, the National Curriculum is graded and lacks both flexibility and integration. This view

is corroborated by Birch and Lally (1995) who suggest that the curriculum be looked into see if better links can be made between different grade-level materials, and if more freedom can be given to educators to differentiate instruction for the different levels of achievement in the class. This, he believes would benefit both multi-grade and mono-grade educators (Berry 2001).

3.5 Educators Experiences of Implementing Multi-grade Teaching

In order to gauge their experiences of practicing multi-grade teaching educators were asked the following question: "How do you implement multi-grade teaching in your classrooms?" Several educators responded and said,

I try to find similar topics so that I can introduce to the learners, but when coming to assessment, the questions are not going to be the same, try but... sometimes it is difficult for me to get similar topics. (North West educator 2)

This is a big problem; I can't be in two places at the same time. When I move to the other group, the other group will make noise, how do I control them? (North West educator 3)

The results showed that planning for instruction in multi-grade classes is a challenge to most educators. Educators indicated that they do not do separate planning for the grades that they are teaching instead they do single planning for single grades. One educator said, "*We are supposed to prep [prepare] for each grade, if it is a normal school, but I can't because this is not a normal school*". This suggests that learners are treated the same even though they are of a different grade. One could argue that learners will not be able to achieve the competencies prescribed for a particular grade as that is not taken into account when planning is done. It should be mentioned that planning is a crucial stage in the teaching and learning process. Educators require skills that will enable them to effectively plan so that learners can achieve their expected outcomes. The movement makes educators think they are not doing their work adequately. Another educator said, "*I move from one group to another...at the end of the day I feel that I did not do my job well*". Classroom observations also confirm what was said by the above educator. For example, it was also observed that while the educator was busy with one group the other

group would be busy with a task to complete. This task will then be completed without the educator's input or supervision. In most instances, the learners did not complete the tasks assigned to them. The educators did not try to ask learners about the task, as it was used solely to keep them busy while the educator was teaching another group. This could be attributed to lack of proper planning on the part of the educators. In addition, planning done by educators did not incorporate the different grades to be taught in the classroom.

4. CONCLUSION

4.1 Curriculum

In South Africa there is no set of multi-grade teaching curriculum but learners have to live within the confines of the national curriculum of mono-grade schooling. In addition, learners use the same textbooks used in mono-grade classes and in South Africa, like many other countries, the national curriculum is graded and lacks both flexibility and integration. There is therefore a need for curriculum to be looked at to see if better links can be made between different grade-level materials, and if more freedom can be given to educators to differentiate instruction for the different levels of achievement in the class.

4.2 Teacher Training

Absence of training of multi-grade teaching educators was another problem identified. The educator is the key factor in the determination of the success of multi-grade teaching as such there is need for special educator training for multi-grade teaching. However, in South Africa authors are not aware of any training specifically designed for multi-grade teaching – only mono-grade educators are currently receiving attention with an assumption that such educators will automatically be able to teach in multi-grade schools.

4.3 Lack of Human and Physical Resources

Educators do not believe that quality education can be achieved as long as there is still multi-grade teaching due to lack of human resources in the schools. Findings suggest that for

quality education to be delivered a sufficient number of qualified educators who are enthusiastic and passionate about their work need to be employed. In order to have quality education prevail in South Africa, there is a need for more 'democratic professionals' who are able to do their work with diligence. Lack of support for educators seems to be the main problem in the implementation of the multi-grade strategy in classrooms.

4.4 Rurality and Multi-grade Teaching

Not many educators like to live and work in rural areas. As indicated earlier most of them see it as a forced exile because of the political, economic, geographical, social and cultural structure reasons. In South Africa, in order to attract and retain properly qualified educators and to compensate and provide adequate numbers of educators in rural areas, the Department of Education set up a bursary scheme which contributes to the training of educators such that once the training is completed the educators will be deployed into a rural area in their hometown. Under this scheme, an educator will have to serve the school for a period equal to the number of years for which funding was granted.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Educators need to be equipped with planning skills to ensure that the learning outcomes specified in each grade are achieved. The Department of Education needs to re-train educators to adapt to multi-grade teaching in the classroom. This suggests that multi-grade teaching needs to be embedded in educator education programmes at both pre and in-service training. During their initial teacher education, educators need to be trained on teaching in mono-grade as well as multi-grade schools for them to be able to function effectively in their different teaching contexts. There is need for production of cadres who are able to teach in both categories of schools (mono-grade and multi-grade). Material, educators' capacity building and contextual support are needed to ensure that the strategy is effective and learners receive quality education. The learning materials should promote self study and independence among learners. Teaching materials that support multi-grade teaching should be made available.

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