

An Exploration Of The State Of School Readiness In The Offering Of Multi-Grade Teaching: A Case Of Schools In Sekhukhune South District

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Abstract-This study evaluated the state of schools in the implementation of multi-grade teaching. The researchers followed a qualitative approach with a case study research design. The study population consisted of 24 participants made up of teachers and principals in eight multi-grade schools in the Sekhukhune South District in Limpopo Province. Purposive sampling was used to select three participants from each of the six sampled schools, making a total sample size of 18 participants. Data was collected through individual interviews, focus group discussion, and document analysis. A thematic approach was employed to analyze the data, by identifying themes emerging from the data collection instruments. The study revealed that schools were not ready to offer multi-grade teaching. Teacher incapacity; lack of national framework on multi-grade teaching; and lack of teacher development programs caused schools not to be ready to offer the multi-grade curriculum. The study recommends that multi-grade teachers and their SMTs should be trained in multi-grade teaching. Moreover, schools should be provided with curriculum guidelines on multi-grade teaching. Furthermore, teacher-training universities should offer multi-grade teaching as a compulsory module.

Keywords:Multi-grade teaching;Learner Diversity;Curriculum Differentiation.

I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of multi-grade teaching is a condition in which learners in more than one grade are taught in the same classroom at the same time by one teacher (Funtua, 2015). Schools that offer multi-grade teaching are therefore called multi-grade schools (Taole, 2014). Conversely, schools that ordinarily service learners of a single grade are called mono-grade schools (Funtua, 2015). Notably, multi-grade teaching is extremely activity-based and group work is an indispensable phenomenon (Combrinck, 2011). Little (2004) presents some of the common conditions that lead to the existence of multi-grade teaching worldwide. For instance, multi-grade teaching occurs mostly in schools with low learner enrolment. Besides, schools experiencing high teacher absenteeism could be compelled to offer multi-grade teaching. Furthermore, schools that have a cluster of classrooms scattered across different locations would offer multi-grade teaching.

Hyry-Beihammer and Hascher (2015) in their study in Austria and Finland found that 15, 3%, and 16, 4% of these countries' schools respectively, practiced multi-grade teaching. Furthermore, Hyry-Beihammer and Hascher (2015) study found that Austria and Finland had five types of student groupings for multi-grade teaching. The first

grouping is parallel curricula that involves teaching multi-grade learners in one classroom but exchangeably. The second grouping is curriculum rotation which involves the whole multi-grade class focusing on one grade curriculum for a year and the other grade curriculum the following year. The third grouping is whole-class teaching where learners are taught the same curriculum simultaneously. The fourth grouping is subject stagger which involves teaching learners in turns but on different subjects and grades. The fifth grouping is a spiral curriculum that involves teaching the same subject and topic for multi-grades but content expands as the grades progress. Major challenges in the implementation of multi-grade teaching in Austria and Finland were that teachers were not trained on multi-grade teaching in their initial teacher training institutions.

The study conducted by Seameo Innotech (2011:9) found that multi-grade teaching in the Philippines was introduced far back in 1920 but the number increased in 1990 due to the "Education for All" campaign which sought to "reach the unreachable learners and ensure their right to education". The following were found to be predominant features of multi-grade teaching in the Philippines (Seameo Innotech, 2011:9): Multi-grade teaching was implemented in small schools with less than 100 learners. Multi-grade teaching also resulted in lower learner performance than mono-grade schools. Moreover, it was

practiced in a poorly maintained school infrastructure. Also, principals were overburdened with teaching and management roles. Besides, there was no pre-service training on multi-grade teaching pedagogy. In-service training programs were organized but poorly attended. Furthermore, there were difficulties in classroom management. Lastly, mono-grade teaching and learning strategies were still applied in multi-grade teaching despite a need for unconventional pedagogy.

A study by Joubert (2006) notes that multi-grade teaching in African countries was adopted in the 1960s to achieve access to quality universal primary education. The study found that it is challenging for multi-grade schools in Africa to implement a national curriculum as it was designed for mono-grade settings. Consequently, Joubert (2006) cautions that if the implementation of a multi-grade approach is not well-managed, there could be numerous negative consequences such as a drop in learner performance. Furthermore, learners could be 2 years behind their counterparts in mono-grade schools. Hence, Joubert (2006) recommends that the national curriculum should be reconfigured for effective curriculum delivery in multi-grade schools.

A Task Team was instituted by the Minister of Basic Education in the Republic of South Africa to investigate challenges in the implementation of the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) since 2002 (Department of Basic Education Task Team Report, 2009). This task team compiled a report with recommendations for improved implementation of NCS including suggestions on multi-grade teaching. The report intimates that "separate and special guideline documents for multi-grade classes should be developed and be aligned to CAPS documents" (Department of Basic Education Task Team Report, 2009:27).

In response, the Department of Basic Education released "Guidelines for Responding to Learner Diversity in the Classroom through CAPS" (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2011). These guidelines identify curriculum differentiation as one of the key strategies to respond to diversity (DBE, 2011). Surprisingly, these guidelines do not elaborate on how curriculum differentiation could be applied in a multi-grade context. This is a concern because diversity levels are high in a multi-grade class as learners have diverse ages, grades, and abilities. Even the "Education White Paper 6" which provides the framework and strategies to ensure that education delivery does not discriminate against learners with special education needs in South Africa, is silent on multi-grade teaching (DoE, 2001). These legislative documents seem to demonstrate that the Department of Basic Education ignores curriculum delivery in multi-grade schools. This could be true because the study by Taole and Mncube (2012) reveals three inconsistencies. Firstly, South Africa's curriculum was not flexible to be

effectively delivered in multi-grade schools. Secondly, teacher training was only meant for mono-grade teaching. Thirdly, teachers in multi-grade schools lacked curriculum support.

The current study explores the state of school readiness in the offering of multi-grade teaching in Sekhukhune South District. The theoretical perspective of Kolb (1984) was employed to suggest how multi-grade teaching can be effectively offered in Sekhukhune South District.

Research Question

How ready are schools in Sekhukhune South to offer multi-grade teaching?

Research objective

To evaluate the level of readiness for schools in Sekhukhune South District to offer multi-grade teaching.

Theoretical Framework

Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) was applied in this study as it is one amongst many of the theoretical orientations upon which teaching and learning could be based. Experiential Learning Theory emphasizes the central role played by experience in teaching and learning. Hence Kolb (1984:20) defines "learning as the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience". According to Kolb (1984), the process of creating knowledge through experience takes place in a four-stage learning cycle in which each learner goes through all the stages which are: Diverging; Assimilation; Converging; and Accommodation. That is to say, learner's best abilities could be achieved by either Diverging (Feeling-CE and Watching-RO); Assimilation (Thinking-AC and Watching-RO); Converging (Thinking-AC and Doing-AE), or Accommodation (Feeling-CE and Doing-AE). Kolb's Experiential Learning cycle demonstrates that in the learning process, "one moves varying degrees from actor to observer, and from specific involvement to general analytic detachment" (Kolb, 1984:31). Therefore, effective learning occurs when a learner can go through all four stages (Malatji & Singh, 2018).

II. APPLICATION OF KOLB'S EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING THEORY INTO THIS STUDY

Diverging, assimilation, converging, and accommodating learning styles were considered to be critical in assisting schools in the implementation of multi-grade teaching in Sekhukhune South District.

Diverging

According to Kolb (1984), this learning style is also regarded as a concrete experience (CE) and reflective observation (RO) stage. Learners in this learning style prefer working in groups, listening with an open mind, and receiving personal feedback because they enjoy learning by feeling and watching (McCarthy, 2016). In the present study, multi-grade teaching could succeed in a setting that is predominated by group activities as learners would enjoy working with each other (they like people).

Assimilation

Kolb refers to this learning style as the abstract conceptualization (AC) and reflective observation (RO) stage. Learners in this mode prefer readings, lectures, exploration, and analysis as they learn by thinking and watching (McCarthy, 2016). In the present study, elaboration on key concepts and an explanation of topics during lessons could be effective.

Converging

Converging learning style according to Kolb (1984) involves learning through abstract conceptualization (AC) and abstract experimentation (AE). Learners in this learning style prefer active experimentation, laboratory assignments, and practical applications because they learn by thinking and doing (Kolb, Boyatzis & Mainemelis, 1999). Consequently, in the present study, exposing learners to laboratory research projects and practical work could make multi-graded teaching effective. Equally important, integration of ICT (Information and Communication Technology) in teaching and learning would make multi-grade teaching very stimulating in abstract conceptualization and experimentation.

Accommodating

According to Kolb (1984) accommodating means learning through concrete experimentation (CE) and abstract experimentation (AE). Learners prefer working with others to get assignments done, performing fieldwork, and testing different approaches to complete a project (McCarthy, 2016). So, learners with this learning mode prefer to learn by feeling and doing. In the present study on multi-grade teaching, exposing learners to a variety of fieldwork learning activities would be beneficial to experiential learning.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Approach

This study followed the qualitative approach to evaluate the level of preparedness of schools in Sekhukhune South District to offer multi-grade teaching. Data was collected in a natural setting where participants experience the phenomenon under study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The researcher was able to interact directly with participants allowing them to share their experiences in offering multi-grade teaching. Moreover, the researcher collected data on his own using self-designed data collection instruments for focus groups and a face-to-face interview with participants (Young & Wayne, 2019). Furthermore, the researcher examined official school documents on his own. Thus, the qualitative approach permits the use of multiple data collection instruments (Creswell, 2013). Schools' official documents were explored. Information from principals and teachers in multi-grade schools was clearly described using words with fewer statistics (Chorba, 2011). The use of multiple method perspectives is a triangulation technique that deepened data credibility and reliability in this study (Treharne & Riggs, 2015).

Research Design

This study used a case study research design. The case in this study was that of teachers teaching in a multi-grade setting. The case study design assisted the researcher to use multiple methodological perspectives on multi-grade teaching. In so doing, the present study applied a triangulation technique that also heightened data validity and credibility (Flick, 2013). Moreover, through the case study design, the researcher collected contemporary data from schools that were offering multi-grade teaching within the duration of the study (Yin, 2018). Furthermore, case studies are valuable in conducting an in-depth analysis of a program, event, activity, or process under study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Accordingly, the researcher in this study made a thorough analysis of the implementation of multi-grade teaching in the six case study schools. The application of the case study design was found to be appropriate in exploring how multi-grade teaching evolved (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015).

IV. POPULATION AND SAMPLING

1. Population

The population consisted of all principals and teachers from all eight (8) primary schools that offer multi-grade teaching in Lobethal and Ngwaritsi Education Circuits within Sekhukhune South Education District. The total population was 24, which consisted of teachers and principals of multi-grade schools in the two (2) circuits.

Sampling Procedures

Purposive sampling was used to select six (6) case study schools from the eight (8) schools that offer multi-grade teaching in the two circuits. Following this, one (1) principal and two (2) teachers were chosen from each of the six case study schools. The total sample size was eighteen (18) participants.

Data Collection

In this study, data was collected employing focus group discussion with principals; semi-structured individual interviews with teachers as well as document analysis. Focus group discussion and Interview notes were compiled into a pre-designed protocol to be used during the process of data analysis (Creswell, 2013). Document analysis entailed studying official school documents such as schools' journals of activities, minutes, and schools/departmental policies on multi-grade teaching and learner workbooks. Resultantly, these three data collection instruments supported the researcher in systematic data collection on a multi-grade teaching phenomenon (Emulsharaf, 2012).

I. DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis in qualitative research involves the classification and interpretation of linguistic and visual material to make statements about implicit and explicit dimensions and structures of meaning-making in the material and what is represented in it (Flick, 2013:4). In the context of this study, focus group discussion, and interview notes together with statements from the analyzed

documents, were broken into themes in line with the research question (Young & Hren, 2013). In some instances, participants' direct responses were categorized in vivo terms (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This qualitative data analysis approach where data is assembled or categorized in terms of common themes is called data coding (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015). Young and Hren (2013) further simplified data coding as the organization of data into chunks or portions that are similar or share the same properties. On the whole, this study applied a thematic approach to analyze data (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017).

V.RESULTS

The results of this study are summarized in the following themes: Teachers' perception of their readiness to offer multi-grade teaching; Availability and use of national framework on multi-grade teaching; Handling learner diversity in a multi-grade class; Teacher development on multi-grade teaching; and Creation of experiential learning opportunities. These themes guided the presentation of results below:

I. Teachers' perception of their readiness to offer multi-grade teaching

Multi-grade teaching different from single grade teaching involves the teaching of two or more grades in one class. This kind of teaching would require specialized skills from teachers. There was a sense amongst teachers that multi-grade teaching was too demanding than single-grade teaching. Here is what **Teacher-7** in the focus group had to say:

"Multi-grade teaching is tiring while it is unable to address the educational needs of all learners. We do not have time for remediation and enrichment lessons as compared to single-grade schools" (Data set: focus group).

This response which was not disputed by focus group members suggests that teachers were not ready to offer multi-grade teaching.

2. Availability and use of national framework on multi-grade teaching

Teaching becomes most effective if it is guided by pedagogical frameworks provided by the national department of education. Contrastingly, all teachers in the focus group indicated that their schools did not receive pedagogical frameworks on multi-grade teaching. For example, **Teacher-5** raised this uncertainty:

"We teach without national guidelines and unfortunately we are not sure whether we are doing the right thing or not" (Data set: focus group).

Principal-5 supported teachers' views by saying that: "Lack of frameworks leads to frustration as we implement multi-grade teaching using any approach that is to our convenience" (Data set: individual interview).

These quotations show that multi-grade teaching could be a success if schools were provided with pedagogical frameworks.

Handling learner diversity in a multi-grade class

When analyzing school documents, the inability of teachers to handle learner diversity was evident in one of the six schools' journal entries. The journal entry by the curriculum advisor who visited the **school-4** had this extract:

"I visited this school to support grades 2 and 3 teachers on multi-grade teaching. Findings: some learners are left behind while others are ahead. Recommendation: The teacher must make some reinforcement" (Data set: document analysis).

In support of this response,

Principal-3 emphatically declared:

"To be honest, below-average learners are not given attention in multi-grade teaching due to time constraints" (Data set: individual interview).

These responses suggest that learner diversity as one of the key principles in multi-grade teaching was severely compromised.

II. TEACHER DEVELOPMENT ON MULTI-GRADE TEACHING

The demographic information captured through participants' attendance registers showed that all teachers and their principals were not trained in multi-grade teaching during their initial teacher training. Besides, only three of the twelve teachers attended developmental workshops related to multi-grade teaching though only for the foundation phase. **Teacher-2** said:

"Workshops were organized for the foundation phase teachers for two days. Some of the workshop participants were requested to role play as learners while others role played as teachers" (Data set: focus group).

These responses raised the argument that teacher development on multi-grade teaching was inadequate as it ignored teachers in the Inter-Sen phase.

3. CREATION OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES.

Teachers' responses displayed a mixed understanding of the concept of experiential learning. **Teacher-8** said that he teaches sentence construction by associating it with television stories and movies that learners watch at home. Still, on the teaching of languages, **Teacher-10** added that she requests learners to tell stories that are normally recited at their homes. Similarly, **Teacher-4** said:

"I use pictures to bring learners' life experiences into the classroom" (Data set: focus group).

On the contrary, **Teacher-12** said:

"We do not have time dedicated or planned for experiential learning in our school" (Data set: focus group).

Teachers' responses illustrate that they understood the experiential learning concept but had challenges with the application. None of their responses demonstrated how

they used present-day technology such as laboratories and computers in creating an environment conducive to learning from experience. Besides, fieldwork as part of the creation of an experiential learning environment was barely touched. It could therefore be argued that experiential learning programs did not include practicals and the use of fieldwork.

VI. DISCUSSION

The following themes were used to discuss the results of this study: Teachers' perception of their readiness to offer multi-grade teaching; Availability and use of national framework on multi-grade teaching; Handling learner diversity in a multi-grade class; Teacher development on multi-grade teaching; and Creation of experiential learning opportunities.

1. Teachers' Perception Of Their Readiness To Offer Multi-Grade Teaching

Teachers in this study felt incompetent and eventually perceived multi-grade teaching to be too demanding and tiring. These findings confirm the view held by teachers in Namibia that multi-grade teaching was "hard work, more work, tiring and more demanding" (Siririka, 2018:160). Furthermore, these findings relate with the ones observed in Zambia where multi-grade teaching was found to be strenuous such that teachers named it a "swim or sink for survival" approach (Kivunja & Sims, 2015:17).

Availability and Use Of National Framework On Multi-Grade Teaching

This study revealed that all six multi-grade schools did not have the national framework on multi-grade teaching. As a result, schools relied on the use of single-grade curriculum guidelines. This finding is consistent with the work of Kucita and Maxwell (2016) who established that Bhutanese multi-grade schools could not implement a multi-grade curriculum effectively as they relied on single-grade curriculum guidelines. Buaraphan, Inrit, and Kochasila (2018) argue that the lack of curriculum policy directives hampers the sustainability of multi-grade teaching.

Handling Learner Diversity In A Multi-Grade Class

Multi-grade classrooms accommodate learners with diverse learning abilities consequent to their diverse grades and age groups. It is, therefore, prudent that multi-grade teachers possess skills in dealing with learner diversity (Hyry-Beihammer & Haschers, 2015). Contrary to the Department of Basic Education's directives on the handling of learner diversity, the present study established that multi-grade teachers could not effectively handle learner diversity (DBE, 2011). This study found a lack of skills being the major limiting factor in the handling of learner diversity.

Teacher development on multi-grade teaching

This study revealed that lack of initial teacher training on multi-grade teaching resulted in teacher incompetence in offering this curriculum. These findings confirm what was found by other researchers that multi-grade teachers pull hard when they had not been trained on the approach (Moeini, Moradian & Khoroshi 2016). Teacher development programs in this study were found to be considerate of only teachers in the foundation phase. These findings relate to those established by published work by Mulaudzi (2016) and Zuma (2015) who illustrate that their multi-grade teachers were not offered appropriate teacher development training. Brown (2010) argues that multi-grade teachers need to be supported to change from single-grade to multi-grade pedagogy.

2. Creation Of Experiential Learning Opportunities.

It was evident in the present study that teachers understood the experiential learning concept. For example, the storytelling techniques and use of pictures in this study relate well with Kolb's abstract conceptualization (AC) and reflective observation (RO) stage in which learners prefer readings, lectures, and analysis as they learn by thinking and watching (McCarthy, 2016). Nevertheless, teachers in the present study did not illustrate the use of ICT to engage learners on Kolb's four learning styles: Feeling, reflection, thinking, and action as recommended by Passarelli and Kolb (2011). In Kolb's (1984) view, accommodating is a condition where learning takes place through concrete experimentation (CE) and abstract experimentation (AE). During accommodating, learners perform field trips and testing different approaches to complete a project (McCarthy, 2016). In contrast to this view, this study found that schools did not heed this advice since fieldwork and practicals as part of the creation of an experiential learning environment were not illustrated.

VII. CONCLUSION

The study concludes that schools were not ready to offer multi-grade teaching. Teachers are key curriculum implementers in schools and should have the capacity to deliver as expected by curriculum policies. On the contrary, multi-grade teachers in this study felt incompetent and regarded multi-grade teaching to be an overwhelming phenomenon. The study revealed that the non-availability of a national framework on multi-grade teaching alongside the lack of appropriate teacher development programs caused schools not to be ready to offer the multi-grade curriculum. It was established that lack of appropriate teacher development programs resulted in teachers not being able to apply multi-grade teaching approaches such as the handling of learner diversity and experiential learning programs.

Recommendations

The study recommends that all multi-grade teachers and their SMTs be provided with in-service training on multi-grade teaching. Furthermore, teacher-training universities

should have multi-grade teaching as a compulsory module for all teacher-trainees. The study further recommends that the Department of Basic Education (DBE) provides all multi-grade schools with guidelines on multi-grade teaching. Moreover, the DBE should establish a unit that deals specifically with multi-grade teaching programs. It will be the responsibility of this unit to facilitate in-service training programs.

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