

## Educational Research for Social Change (ERSC)

Volume: 3 No. 1, April 2014

pp. 20-36

[ersc.nmmu.ac.za](http://ersc.nmmu.ac.za)

ISSN: 2221-4070

# Voices of despair: Challenges for multigrade teachers in a rural district in South Africa

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## Abstract

The focus of this paper is an exploration of the challenges experienced by a group of 19 multigrade teachers in the Uitenhage District of South Africa's Eastern Cape Province. This interpretive qualitative, exploratory, case study made use of semistructured personal interviews, focus group interviews, and an open-ended questionnaire as data gathering tools to explore the perceived challenges. The findings from the data were categorised using a three-order typology (Benveniste & McEwan, 2000; Raffo, Dyson, Gunter, Hall, Jones, & Kalambouka, 2007), and the generative theory of rurality (Balfour, Mitchell, & Moletsane, 2008) was used as lens for the discussion of the data. The findings reported in this paper relate to the first phase of the research project. The initial findings of the study suggested that the participants viewed their rural multigrade context as one of deficit; however, after the Intel@Teach Programme was introduced, there was a positive change. The findings in this paper, which forms part of a larger study, suggest there were several first-order (micro or self), second-order (meso or school), and third-order (macro or system wide) challenges—curriculum issues and support being key aspects because multigrade schools have to implement a monograde curriculum. In addition, it seemed that multigrade teachers should be supported to enable them to acquire skills in building agency and sustainable relationships in order to have a different disposition towards resources.

Keywords: Generative Theory; Multigrade; MultigradeTeaching; Rurality; Rural Schools.

## Introduction

After the South African democratic elections in 1994 when the African National Congress came into power, it was believed the education playing field would be levelled. The South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 (Republic of South Africa, 1996b) and the Constitution, Act 108 of 1996 (Republic of South Africa, 1996a) indicated that the mission and vision of the Department of Basic Education (DBE) is to provide quality education for all. This was reaffirmed when the DBE committed itself to the principles of the Dakar Framework for Action in 2000 (World Education Forum, 2000) and again through the Department of Education's Quality Learning and Teaching Campaign (Department of Education, 2009). However, it seems

the main focus of education is on monograde education despite the fact that multigrade teaching is a reality in rural areas (Brown, 2010; Little, 2006).

Research into rurality within the South African context, such as the recent special edition of *Perspectives in Education* (Balfour, De Lange, & Khau, 2012), has not indicated whether the challenges researched were in the monograde or multigrade context. Ebersöhn and Ferreira (2012), for example, referred to two rural schools that consisted of 10 and four teachers respectively, which seems to suggest that these schools were not multigrade, but monograde. Similarly, scrutiny of the book, *School–University Partnerships for Educational Change in Rural South Africa* (Islam, Mitchell, De Lange, Balfour, & Combrinck, 2011), indicated that special reference to multigrade education in the rural context was not reported.

Internationally, Bhardwaj (2008), Brunswic and Valérien (2004), Juvane (2007), and Little (2006) have spoken out for assisting multigrade schools, and made a case for their continuation. Locally, Brown (2010) has indicated that the multigrade context is an under-researched area. In the light of Brown's assertion, as well as being involved with the Uitenhage District Office, rural schools, and informal interactions with multigrade teachers, the authors of this study grappled with the question, "What are the problems that multigrade teachers experience within the Uitenhage District?" The purpose of this paper, which forms part of a larger research study (Subramanien, 2014), was to ascertain the challenges related to multigrade education, according to a group of 20 multigrade teachers. We intend reporting, in a follow-up article linked to the research findings reported within this article, how the Intel@ Teach programme<sup>1</sup> enabled the participating multigrade teachers to become resilient and responsive to their own needs, and how it assisted them to overcome most of the challenges they had experienced. With reference to this article, the rationale for determining the challenges was to provide insight and understanding for possible action, not only to the Uitenhage District Office but also to the Eastern Cape DBE, because the Eastern Cape is one of the provinces with the largest number of rural and farm schools (Gardiner, 2008; Joubert, 2010) and hence also, of multigrade schools.

## Multigrade education

The multigrade model, instead of the monograde education model, seems to be implemented mostly in rural areas (Tsolakidis & Constantinidi 2006). In a monograde school, learners are grouped according to grade with a specific teacher assigned to every grade, or class within that grade. By contrast, learners in a multigrade school are not grouped and taught in separate classes; learners of mixed ages, abilities, and in different grades are all present at the same time, in the same classroom with one teacher (Jordaan & Joubert, 2007; Joubert, 2010; Little, 2001; Tsolakidis, 2010). It seems that multigrade education, as practice, is not one of choice but a necessity to provide education to learners in remote areas. Hence, in order to make education economically viable and to provide access to education, the multigrade education model seems to be the only option in many rural areas (Bhardwaj, 2008; Little, 2006). A school with multigrade classes, in many instances, has only one or two teachers in total—one for Grades 1 to 3 (foundation phase) and one for Grades 4 to 7 (intermediate and secondary phases)—one of these teachers also being the principal with a full teaching load as well as performing non-teaching duties.

## Rurality

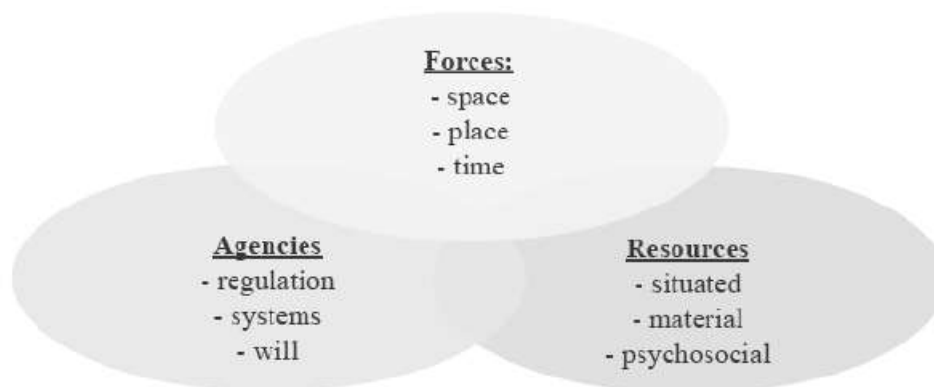
The concepts, *rural* and *urban*, are concepts that have different meanings that could be interpreted differently within the same country and among different countries (Gardiner, 2008; Wako, 2005). The term *rural school* in this study refers to schools that are far away from city centres and towns. Ebersöhn and Ferreira (2012) argued that the term, rural, should not always be equated with backwardness because there are

<sup>1</sup> See <http://engage.intel.com/welcome> and <http://engage.intel.com/groups/intel-teach-elements-implementation-toolkit>

stories that celebrate resilience within the rural school context. They continued by stating that rurality should not necessarily be seen in a context of deficit (Ebersöhn & Ferreira, 2012 with reference to Balfour, Mitchell, & Moletsane, 2008).

With reference to rurality, and how to assist with addressing challenges, the work of Balfour et al. (2008) provided a lens for looking at rural education with their generative theory of rurality. The generative theory of rurality views rurality as a construct and not as a context. This construct consists of three variables, namely, forces, agencies, and resources (Balfour et al., 2008). Figure 1 depicts the variables and their associated dimensions. Forces as variable, includes space, place, and time; agencies includes regulation, systems, and will; resources includes the situated, material, and psychosocial (Balfour et al., 2008).

**Figure 1: The three variables and the aspects associated with each (Balfour, 2012, p. 14)**



Regarding forces as variable, Balfour et al. (2008, p. 100) stated that it refers to “the movement of labour and production from the rural to the urban and back again”. Space refers to the inhabited space and the area in which movement occurs, for example, movement from the rural to urban and vice versa that results in “identity formulation or renegotiation” which includes an inward and an outward journey (Balfour et al., 2008). Place relates to habits such as “connectedness, development of identity culture, interdependence with the land, spirituality, ideology and politics, and activism and engagement” (Balfour et al., 2008, p. 100). Time refers to moving from one place to another by moving through space (Balfour et al., 2008).

Agencies as variable denotes that the notions of victimhood, passivity, and dependence should be transcended (Balfour et al., 2008) because they suggest a depiction of deficit. According to Balfour et al. (2008), agency is an attempt to regulate space and time, denoting a positive dimension. In addition, agency, also includes the systemic dimension that refers to the power that resides within the individual, community, and state to transcend challenges, thus supporting the notion that there must be a will to engage with the challenges on various fronts in order to find possible solutions; hence, the importance of building relationships (Balfour et al., 2008).

Resources as variable refers to conceptual, physical, material, and emotional resources—resources that can be purchased or generated (Balfour et al., 2008). Agency and forces seem to play a vital role in acquiring or generating resources but this is not where it stops; these resources have to be maintained and sustained (Balfour et al., 2008). At the same time, it is important to note that a resource that is functional within a particular place could be dysfunctional in another place (Balfour et al., 2008). Recently, Ebersöhn (2013) extended the resource dimension with her relationship-resourced resilience lens. Within this extension, one actually finds a dichotomy, or antithesis, because the perception regarding the absence of resources is blinded by the abundance of resources (Ebersöhn, 2013). At the same time “harvesting” these resources, for example, personal-based resources, school-based resources, community-based resources, societal

resources, and systems-based resources bring the possibility of risks, hence the importance of relationship building to harness the various resources (Ebersöhn, 2013). It is therefore important that teachers, parents, learners, and community members begin looking at their lived context through different lenses. We intend using the generative theory of rurality as lens in a follow up article when we will be looking at the successes of an intervention to address challenges.

### **Theoretical framework: Three-order typology**

Benveniste and McEwan (2000) proposed a two-level typology to frame the challenges experienced by the multigrade teachers. In their two-pronged typology, the macro and micro levels refer to categorising and grouping the challenges within the multigrade teaching context. The macro level refers to system-wide challenges or external interferences—challenges that are beyond the multigrade teacher’s control, such as resource challenges, financing, and training (Brown, 2010; Joubert, 2010; Little, 2006). The micro level refers to challenges that the individual (self) could face, for example, personal attitudes and lack of knowledge and skills (Little, 2006; Tsolakidis & Constantinidi, 2006). The two-level typology was extended to three levels by Raffo, Dyson, Gunter, Hall, Jones, and Kalambouka (2007) who argued that a three-level typology is useful for group challenges pertaining to education and poverty, including multigrade education. They included the meso level, which refers to the school itself, and they specifically refer to the macro level as the “structures linked to power” (Raffo et al., 2007, p. 7). The challenges in the multigrade context seem to be multifaceted and not always easily grouped into one specific category. For the purpose of this study, a three-level typology was used as theoretical framework, namely, the first-order (micro, individual or self) level, second-order (meso, school) level and third-order (macro, beyond school or system-wide) level (Raffo et al., 2007).

The first-order (micro, individual, or self) level refers to aspects such as isolation that influence support as well as attendance of training sessions (Cornish, 2010). Isolation also makes it difficult to attract teachers to teach in remote rural areas (Juvane, 2007). Principals of multigrade schools are also full-time teachers in these schools and are required to manage their school in the same manner as in a monograde school. The teaching workload, and the administration required of a principal, result in administration overload and stress (Brown, 2010; Brunswic & Valérien, 2004; Little, 2006). In terms of community, the learners mostly come from homes of farm workers—workers who have low levels of literacy (Jordaan & Joubert, 2007) and living in impoverished conditions (Cornish, 2010; Juvane, 2005; Little, 2006). This results in a lack of parental involvement, absenteeism, and high dropout rates (Jordaan & Joubert, 2007; Little, 2006).

On the second (meso, school) level, it appears that workload implications (Mulkeen & Higgins, 2009), including the negative connotation of rural (Gardiner, 2008), influence how individual teachers think about the multigrade context—for example, rural as being backward (Cornish, 2010; Gardiner, 2008). Furthermore, unpreparedness for multigrade teaching and its requirements also seems to influence prospective decisions to teach or not to teach within this context (Juvane, 2007; Little, 2006).

The third level (macro, system-wide) challenges seem to be lack of external support (Juvane, 2005; Little, 2006; Pridmore, 2007), an aspect that also becomes evident in the nonexistence of policies and curricula related to multigrade (Little, 2001). This results in uncertainty because multigrade teachers are expected to implement a monograde curriculum within a totally different context, and these teachers also have to deliver in the same manner as their monograde colleagues (Brunswic & Valérien, 2004; Little, 2004). Training and support also seem to be a major challenge (Brown, 2010). In addition, several infrastructural resource challenges exist (Gardiner, 2008; Jordaan & Joubert, 2007; Little, 2006), including lack of finances to support teaching and learning (Juvane, 2005; Little, 2006; Tsolakidis & Constantinidi, 2006).

## Methodology of the research

This qualitative exploratory case study was framed within the interpretive paradigm because the purpose was to explore participating multigrade teachers' perceived challenges pertaining to the multigrade context in rural areas. The case study as research design was deemed appropriate because it provides an opportunity for the rigorous exploration of a single entity (Flyvbjerg, 2011), the single entity being the group or community of multigrade teachers residing within rural areas of Uitenhage district, South Africa. The focus was to explore the participants' perceptions, interpretations, and experiences of challenges through their own eyes (McDonough & McDonough, 1997), providing a voice from their context.

Although case studies have been criticised as being "soft" and not possible to be generalised from (Berg, 1998), probably due to their qualitative nature, Stake (1995) and Merriam (2009) argued that readers have the capacity to ascertain whether the findings seem truthful and credible, and whether the findings are generalisable to their specific contexts. The purpose of this study was not to generalise, but to portray a picture as seen through the eyes and voices of the participants within their specific multigrade contexts and to leave it to readers, for example, officials from the Department of Basic Education, to ascertain whether they are able to relate to the participants' experiences.

There were 19 participating teachers (initially 20, but one teacher passed away during the project) from the Uitenhage district. These participants were purposefully and conveniently selected because the researcher had to visit them every two to three weeks during each term in order to render support regarding a new laptop initiative that had been introduced. Data were gathered by means of individual semi-structured interviews ( $N = 9$ ), focus group interviews that consisted of two groups of three members per interview ( $N = 3$ ), and an open-ended questionnaire ( $N = 19$ ). The transcribing, analysis, and interpretation process was based upon the suggestions of Creswell (2006). The interview data were recorded on a Dictaphone and stored on a secure portable hard drive. The data were transcribed by the researcher and typed in Microsoft Word. The transcribed data were provided to the participants to verify that it was indeed what was said, serving as member checking and adding to credibility and trustworthiness. The transcribed data was read and reread to obtain a comprehensive overview of the participants' stories. The next step was coding and note making in the margin of the transcribed printed data. Similar codes were categorised together and then grouped as micro (first-order), meso (second-order), or macro (third-order) challenges<sup>1</sup>.

Before the research commenced, ethical clearance was applied for and received from the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University Ethics Committee. The aim of the research was explained to the prospective participants and written informed consent forms were completed. Consent was also obtained from the Provincial Department of Education and the Uitenhage District Office. All data are reported anonymously in the format [PI, MGT 7] where the first abbreviation refers to the data generation tool, the second abbreviation to the multigrade teacher, and the number to the participant's number in sequence.

## Results of the research

The findings are presented in terms of first-order (micro, individual, or self) level, second-order (meso, school) level, and third-order (macro, beyond school, or system wide) level (Raffo et al., 2007). A summary of the findings is presented in Table 1. The abbreviation *FGI* refers to focus group interview, *OEQ* to the open-ended questionnaire, and *PI* to personal interview. It is important to note from the outset that the purpose of this article and its findings is not to portray a picture of deficit, although the findings may suggest the contrary because these findings portray the findings from the first phase of a research study.

<sup>1</sup> Reporting in the thesis followed the ICT order challenges framework suggested by Ertmer (1999) who refers to first order challenges as school-based (meso) and second order challenges as the self (micro). However, for the purpose of this article, the framework of Raffo et al. (2007) has been used to categorise and present the data.

The findings after the intervention portray a very different story and one we intend telling in another publication in the near future.

**TABLE 1: Multigrade teaching challenges**

TYPOLOGY	CATEGORIES
First-order challenges relating to intrinsic challenges or teacher-related challenges, also called micro level challenges (self)	Perceived uncaring attitude of the DBE hurts teachers
	Unpreparedness for multigrade teaching demotivates teachers
	Negative perceptions about the multigrade learners
Second-order challenges relating to extrinsic challenges or school level challenges, also called meso level challenges (school)	Isolation and distance impacts on communication and teaching
	Time constraints and work overload as a result of multiple roles
	Lack of resources
	Curriculum challenges
	Learner-related challenges
Third-order challenges relating to system challenges, also referred to as macro level challenges (system wide, beyond school and self)	Lack of support from parents
	Lack of external curriculum training
	Lack of departmental support from officials

### First-order barriers on micro (self) level

#### *Perceived uncaring attitude of the Department of Basic Education hurts teachers*

One could hear the sadness and despair in the participants' voices. Their voices carried emotion as they alluded to the perception that their employer, the Department of Basic Education, was not supporting the school according to their needs. This became apparent during a focus group interview when a participant voiced with emotion that "we teachers are demotivated because we can't find any support" (FGI, MGT 3) and another participant wrote on the open-ended questionnaire that "nobody cares about how we have to struggle to teach our children and make them learn" (OEQ, MGT 19). As a despairing participant voiced during a focus group interview, this resulted in the feeling that "you don't feel worthwhile" (FGI, MGT 3). It appeared participants perceived that nothing was being done to eradicate the dire conditions they experienced.

#### *Unpreparedness for multigrade teaching demotivates teachers*

Linking to the perceived uncaring attitude of the Department of Basic Education, and adding to their frustration, was perception that participants were not being supported, nor prepared, nor trained for teaching in the multigrade classroom. Personal interviews alluded to the above: "Ek is nie getrain vir multigrade nie. Ek was in die diepkant ingegooi" [I have not been trained for multigrade. I was thrown in at the deep end] (PI, MGT 2).

Another participant concurred, responding in the open-ended questionnaire that:



I am frustrated. I am not trained for multigrade teaching. It is frustrating not to be able to complete all the work in a year, and you feel like a failure. We have too much work as principal and the responsibility of teaching everything for more than one grade. I sometimes feel like quitting because it gets too much. And you get no assistance. (OEQ, MGT 16)

Another participant concurred in the open-ended questionnaire: "I am not trained as a multigrade teacher, and there is no support for me. The workload is too much" (OEQ, MGT 11). The frustration of being unprepared and not trained for this context was expanded upon during a focus group interview:

I am not trained as a multigrade teacher; I trained for monograde teaching. Also, when we were at colleges or universities, we were trained for monograde classes and not to teach multigrade classes. The multigrade skills, as I have said, we as teachers have not received any training in that regard within the multigrade. We don't have skills for the multigrade classes. We need those skills. (FGI, MGT 1)

The participants' despair and perceived feelings of unpreparedness for the multigrade classroom seemed to have had a negative influence on their emotional well-being. Frustrations and challenges such as inappropriate preparation and training seemed to be a demotivator that impacted negatively on attitudes. In addition, the great workload seemed to causing stress among participants.

### *Negative perceptions about multigrade learners*

In addition to experiencing an overwhelming feeling of being unprepared for the multigrade classroom, as well as perceiving the Department of Basic Education as not being helpful or supportive, another aspect alluded to was a negative perception about the learners at school within this learning space. It seems the learners, who primarily resided in poverty-stricken homes, were perceived as incompetent and inferior. Furthermore, it appears it was perceived that these learners were not stimulated educationally at home due to their deprived social context. This was highlighted during a focus group interview when a participant said:

The standard of work that you can do with the learner cannot compare with a child from the city where schools are bigger, or near offices, or where there are libraries and computers and those things... they will always stay behind. (FGQ, MGT 2)

One participant was insensitive when he stated during a personal interview that the learners were not educable: "Kinders wat feitlik onopvoedbaar is" [Children who are basically uneducable] (PI, MGT 7).

This seemed to highlight a divide between teacher and learners—a possible bias that had possibly been formed even prior to becoming a multigrade teacher. It seemed participants felt a gloomy future awaited these children; one teacher stated that this could be attributed to what he perceived as being without role models in the community. In addition, this participant mentioned that he felt the only role models these learners seemed to have, were their teachers. This was alluded to in the open-ended questionnaire, when a participant noted: "The learners have no role models, except us teachers. They drop out and fall pregnant. It's like they are doomed to have no future expectation" (OEQ, MGT 19).

From the above, it seems the participants believed teaching was not bringing about social change, but that the multigrade context seemed to perpetuate the status quo of the past.

## Second-order barriers on meso (school) level

### *Isolation and distance impacts on communication and teaching*

The isolation and long distance to town and city, the urban areas, became evident during personal interviews, focus group interviews, and in the open-ended questionnaire when participants stated:

Ons is 180 km van die Distrik af. Afstandgewys, ja, dit affekteer ons. Sommige keer kom informasie laat by ons uit [We are 180 km away from the District Office. The distance, yes, it does affect us. Sometimes information reaches us late]. (PI, MGT 3)

Whenever there is a meeting, workshop, etc. that needs to be attended, the educators concerned have to leave the learners alone. (OEQ, MGT 8)

From the above, it is clear that isolation and long distances had a severe impact on communication and attending departmental workshops. Furthermore, because there were no substitute teachers to relieve teachers summoned to attend departmental meetings and workshops, learners had to be left behind unattended or be sent home. This again led to loss of teaching and learning time. Isolation and the lack of communication had become barriers that impacted negatively on teaching and learning within these schools.

Another aspect that participating teachers were concerned about was that, due to the isolation, student teachers did not choose these schools for practice teaching and hence, students are not exposed to this context and are probably not aware of its existence—an aspect that became evident during focus group interviews and in the open-ended questionnaire:

No teachers from universities come to school to practise teaching, because of the vast distance, big classes. (OEQ, MGT 3)

No practice teachers from universities. (FGI, MGT 1)

It seems, therefore, that these teachers are living in isolation because not only do they not interact with young prospective teacher education students from university who could bring new educational perspectives to the school, but those prospective teachers are also not developing a disposition towards this context. In addition, it is highly probable that students could influence the tertiary curriculum design because they could influence their lecturers to think about these contexts and assist students to find creative solutions for the contextual challenges.

### *Time constraints and work overload as a result of multiple roles*

Closely linked to isolation, distance, and communication, are time constraints and work overload due to the fact that learners of different grades are within the same classroom and, according to the curriculum, all learners should receive the same tuition. Participants stated during focus group interviews, individual personal interviews, and in the open-ended questionnaire that time was an issue:

And there is a time constraint. Teachers do not have enough time to do proper planning for multigrade classes; time constraint is a problem when you have to deal with one learning area for 30 minutes with 3 grades. (FGI, MGT 1)



Time is another challenge. Our timetable is for a single class, yet we are expected to teach more than one grade in that time. (OEQ, MGT 18)

It is evident from the above that the curriculum requires the same expectations and deliverables from a multigrade teacher and yet the context is totally different from the monograde system.

In addition, many multigrade teachers had to fulfil the roles of secretary and principal in addition to their teaching load—roles that had an impact on their workload:

Yes, I am the principal of a school and also have a multigrade class. But, you know, the multigrade classes around here is, about, my class, 41 learners, and is three grades. So how do you do three grades and you have to do your office work, you have to attend to the visitors, the admin, and you have to do all those three learning areas for all three grades? It's impossible. So that is a real challenge. (FGI, MGT 3)

Administration—with a multigrade class, the administrative load upon the teacher is multiplied. (OEQ, MGT 16)

These strenuous demands seem to negatively impact multigrade teachers' time management, planning, and well-being; they start to become overwhelmed and overburdened, possibly leading to demotivation and burnout.

### *Lack of resources*

The data suggest that funding was experienced as a problem, and also the ability to raise funds locally. In addition, the National Norms and Standards for School Funding (Republic of South Africa, 1996b) allocation also seemed not to be working well. This became evident when several participants stated:

Learner enrolment affects the funding—NSF [National Norms and Standards for School Funding] model for funding multigrade schools. (FGI, MGT 2)

Ons budget is te klein om hierdie goed aan te koop [Our budget is too small to buy the necessary things]. (PI, MGT 19)

In addition to funding as resource, infrastructure was viewed as another challenge in the resource spectrum:

Lack of resources like computers, libraries, science labs, sport fields. When you look at the infrastructure, my school, for example, we have applied so many times for maintenance. The floors are falling apart, the roof is falling apart. One of my classrooms... You can't use the classroom on rainy days, because we are afraid of [electric] shorts and things like that. (FGI, MGT 3)

Also the desks in the classrooms, maybe you are there for three grades—Grades 4, 5, 6. The desks are sometimes too big or too small for the learners and especially when there are some learners, say, for instance, in Grade 6, they will have to sit in a Grade 4 desk or a Grade 4 learner have to sit in a Grade 6 desk... they feel uncomfortable, because the desks are not suited for them, and I know of a learner in my class... that learner is so small, and the class which I have, only has senior phase desks. And she can't, she has to stand in that desk to write, and it is very awkward for her to do that. (FGI, MGT 1)

The teachers were also concerned about not having basic learning resources such as textbooks, learning and teaching support material, and even chalkboards:

At the same time, for the many learning areas, there are no textbooks or even teacher guides on multigrade teaching. (FGI, MGT 2)

Resources—in a multigrade class, space and limitation of resources such as textbooks, multimedia, chalkboards, and LTSM [Learner Teacher Support Material] is a big challenge. Sometimes, learners have to wait for textbooks whilst others first complete. (OEQ, MGT 16)

Another issue that was raised was the shortage of multigrade teachers; teachers found it difficult to adapt from monograde to multigrade due to the fact that several grades were grouped as one class. This also placed a great burden on the teachers and hence, they tried to apply for a post in a monograde school:

Ons ondervind 'n tekort aan onderwysers en dit bemoeilik ons taak om by als uit te kom [There is a shortage of teachers and this makes it difficult for those of us within this context to cover everything]. (PI, MGT 20)

That is why when a new teacher comes here, he will only last three months—as soon as he gets a new post, he will leave. (FGI, MGT 3)

From the above, it appears the resourcing of multigrade schools is a great concern because resourcing in the multigrade school cannot be similar to the resourcing of a monograde school. Hence, the resourcing allocated in terms of the National Norms and Standards for School Funding (Republic of South Africa, 1996b), based on the numbers of learners enrolled at a school, cannot be implemented in a similar manner in monograde and multigrade schools because the contexts are totally different. In addition, the textbook challenge—including workbooks and teaching materials—is also something that has to be dealt with. When visiting the schools, we were shocked to find dilapidated buildings including wood and prefabricated structures. A further dehumanising aspect was the fact that many of these schools lacked proper sanitation facilities for the learners.

### *Curriculum challenges*

Participants felt it was extremely difficult to implement A curriculum they perceived as being designed for the monograde school system, within the multigrade context. They sensed that the needs and implications of implementation within the multigrade context were not thought through. This became evident during a focus group interview when a participant mentioned that, “policies are only for the monogrades and when we have CASS [Continuous Assessment] they do not explain to us how to implement these policies” (FGI, MGT 1).

This was affirmed in the open-ended questionnaire when a participant wrote that the “NCS [National Curriculum Statement] and CAPS [Curriculum and Assessment Policy] were designed for monograde context” (OEQ, MGT 4).

Furthermore, participants indicated during a focus group interview that the curriculum is overloaded, which resulted in good consolidation not being possible. Also, that it is problematic to have similar expectations from multigrade learners and teachers in rural contexts when compared to urban ones:

Die sillabus is so gelaai dat jy nie werklik kans het om goeie vaslegging te doen nie. Dieselfde verwagtinge wat vir monograad is... dat hulle dit ook van jou as multigraadonderwyser verwag [The syllabus is so loaded that it is not possible to do proper consolidation. The expectations for the multigrade teachers are the same as for monograde teachers]. (FGI, MGT 6)

It appears then that there seems to be some tension between how the multigrade teacher views multigrade teaching and how the Department of Basic Education perceives it.

### *Learner- related challenges*

Participants voiced their concern regarding fluctuating enrolment numbers as well as problematic discrepant attendance. Although participants did not state it directly, fluctuating numbers impact on the finances of the school because the Department of Basic Education does a head count during the first term of every year and then bases financial assistance for the next year on that number. Hence, if learner enrolment numbers increase during the course of the year, it does not necessarily result in more funding from the DBE. In many instances, learners have had to leave a farm school because their parents were seasonal workers on the farm. The fluctuating aspect was raised during a focus group interview: “Learner enrolment on a farm school is always a problem, because parents do not always stay on the same farm” (FGI, MGT 3).

The majority of learners lived very far from their schools, which had an impact on the learners’ well-being because there was no transport to school. This meant that learners had to walk excessive distances to school in all weather conditions, leading to tiredness and lack of concentration. This was well articulated in a focus group interview:

These learners, they walk very far; they get to school very tired. And if it rains, because of the distance, or the river, you can’t expect these learners to be at school and then those are all things that take time away from actual teaching. (FGI, MGT 2)

In addition, teachers were concerned about the high rate of absenteeism, especially when it was payday because parents then took their children with them to town. It also seemed these learners had to deal with parents who consumed alcohol on payday. This was highlighted in the open-ended questionnaire when a participant wrote:

High absenteeism towards end of the month when the parents go to town and on social grants days. Then the learners go with, because they need medical attention or to make sure the parents do not just buy drink with the money. (OEQ, MGT 17)

It appears that absenteeism, poverty, and a high dropout rate is symptomatic within the multigrade context. The fluctuation of learner numbers can therefore also be linked to lack of resources because departmental financial assistance is based on learner numbers and not the specific type of school.

### **Third-order barriers on macro (system-wide) level**

#### *Lack of support from parents*

In order to be successful, schools have to be supported, however, it seems from the data that the contrary was being experienced by the teachers because support was lacking from parents, the community, and the Department of Basic Education. This lack of support from the DBE was alluded to previously. Parental support and hence, community support from parents, due to working conditions and expectations from employers who demanded long hours of physical work, also played its part in parents as well as their children being unable to participate in and support school activities. This was evident when a participant stated during a focus group interview:

Ongelukkig sit jy met groot hoeveelheid onbetrokke ouers. Ouers wat nie in staat is om hulself te help nie—hoe gaan hulle hulle kinders help? En hulle het nie befondsing om te sê hulle het boeke en goed wat die kinders kan navorsing doen” [Unfortunately, you have a large number of uninvolved parents. Parents who are not able to help themselves—how are they going to help their children? And they do not have the funds for books and things the children need for research]. (FGI, MGT 5)

It seems, thus, support from parents and parents’ non-involvement was due to low literacy levels and extensive and demanding working hours, which resulted in the neglect of their children’s education. It appears that learners from multigrade contexts are deprived of their educational needs because the majority of these learners’ parents are farm workers, poorly remunerated, and with a low level of education and literacy levels.

#### *Lack of external curriculum training*

In the previous subsection, we alluded to the fact that participants indicated that teachers tried to leave the multigrade context as soon as a position at a monograde school became available. The data suggest that another possible reason for the above could be the fact that multigrade teachers were not only not being trained for teaching within this context but, equally important, workshops regarding curriculum changes were being experienced as extremely difficult because the training focused on the monograde context. Multigrade teachers felt that orientation and training with reference to the new curriculum, for example the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement, did not cater for their realities. This became apparent during personal interviews and within the focus group interviews:

As dit kom by workshops en clinics en goed, dan sukkel ons, want niemand kan vir ons antwoorde gee nie. Die werkswinkels is net gerig op onderwysers wat een graad het” [During workshops, clinics and the like, we struggle because nobody can provide answers for us. The workshops are geared towards teachers with one grade only]. (PI, MGT 19)

This was affirmed in the open-ended questionnaire and focus group interviews when teachers wrote regarding curriculum training,

How can they expect us to survive? (OEQ, MGT 18)

There is no support from the Department on how to deal with the changing curriculum for us as multigrade teachers. We have to do everything. (OEQ, MGT 17)

I can't cut the curriculum for my specific situation. (FGI, MGT 1)

It seems the Department of Basic Education's subject advisors were not prepared to deal with multigrade issues pertaining to the curriculum. This became apparent when a participant mentioned during a focus group interview: "Subject advisors leave after a workshop when they finish with monograde and the multigrade teacher does not reach all subjects and they are not sure if they are on the right track or not" (FGI, MGT 2). This was also indicated in the open-ended questionnaire: "They never prepared for us from the start" (OEQ, MGT 19).

The above suggests the preparation for in-service workshops does not take the context of the multigrade teachers into consideration, and that the focus is on the monograde context. It appears then that the main focus of the South African curriculum is geared towards monograde education because there seems to be a lack of recognition and planning in policies, procedures, and training from the DBE for multigrade teachers.

#### *Lack of departmental support from officials at school level*

On the macro, or external to the school, level it appears participants perceived that the Department of Basic Education was not providing support at school level. This was evident when a participant stated in the open-ended questionnaire that there was "no multigrade support person on departmental level" (OEQ, MGT 1). In supporting the above, a participant mentioned during a personal interview: "Ek kry nie enige hulp van die Department af nie" [I do not get any help from the Department] PI, MGT 6).

It seems thus that teachers want support and school visits from departmental officials but it appears from the data from previous sections, that department officials do not have the necessary skills and experience to assist the multigrade teachers; the officials seem to have only monograde experience. The data seem to imply that the Rural Development Directorate that has as its aim the support of rural schools, has not made inroads within the Uitenhage district.

## **Discussion**

The data suggested that on a first-order level, the participants perceived the Department of Basic Education as not caring for their needs, an aspect that led to a negative attitude towards the DBE. In addition, it became clear that inappropriate preparation or training for teaching within the multigrade contexts, seemed to be a demotivator. Furthermore, the perceived lack of care from the Department of Basic Education seemed to negatively impact on the teachers' attitudes. In addition, it became evident the workload is becoming a stress factor that leads to a feeling of burn-out. Another aspect highlighted were negative perceptions the multigrade teachers had of their learners. It seemed the feelings of being unprepared and experiencing hopelessness in this learning space were very likely to result in negative perceptions. Hence, it becomes vital for teachers to create or develop a different stance within the multigrade learning space, that is, try to put themselves in their learners' shoes—possibly suggesting that teachers should rather view themselves as agents of hope, because their learners' social milieu is not always conducive to the learning the teachers envisage.

On a second-order level, it became evident from the data that the isolation and lack of communication from the Department of Basic Education had become a barrier that impacted negatively on the self and on teaching and learning in these schools. In addition, it became apparent that the multigrade teachers felt there was a need for student teachers to observe and experience teaching within this context because

these experiences could possibly assist in making faculties of education in tertiary education institutions aware of the challenges. These education faculties could then also assist with the preparation of teachers to function within the multigrade context.

It seemed that the great workload was causing stress among participants due to the demands of the curriculum. The expectations from a multigrade teacher are the same as from a monograde teacher; yet the contexts are very different. These expectations seemed to negatively impact on the multigrade teacher's wellness because time constraints and planning-related aspects resulted in feelings and emotions of despair and consequently, possible demotivation and burnout.

It also became evident that the resourcing of multi-grade schools is problematic because financial resourcing to these schools was made in a similar manner as to monograde schools. Furthermore, it became apparent that the teachers and learners at multigrade level were not receiving the textbooks, workbooks, and teaching materials that were required. Equally important, teachers and learners felt dehumanised due to the fact that there were not proper ablution facilities for learners. The above concurs with the sentiments of Gardiner (2008), Jordaan and Joubert (2007) and Little (2006) pertaining to infrastructure and resources being problematic within the multigrade context, and with Cornish's (2010) argument that it is problematic to retain teachers within the multigrade system due to the many challenges that have to be overcome.

There also seemed to be tension created due to the fact that the Department of Basic Education does not view multigrade education as a separate entity; this became apparent in the policies, training practices, curriculum, the system itself, as well as in teacher support. It became evident that the DBE appears to favour monograde education. It became thus imperative to review that stance and to engage with the multigrade teachers to assist them with reference to curriculum aspects. Equally important, it appeared that absenteeism, poverty, and a high dropout rate was symptomatic within the multigrade context.

From a third-order level perspective, that is, external to the self and immediate school context, it seemed the missing support from parents was problematic within the multigrade context. It also appeared that curriculum training from the Department of Basic Education did not take the multigrade teachers' needs and context into consideration, concurring with Little (2004) that there seems to be a lack of support worldwide for the multigrade teacher. Lastly, no support in the form of onsite school visits by departmental officials seemed to be an important aspect that requires serious attention from the Department of Basic Education.

## Conclusion

Through using the first-, second-, and third-order barrier typology, we wanted to understand how teachers perceived the challenges within the multigrade context in a rural area. The findings pertaining to these challenges suggest that the forces of space, time, and place had a direct impact on how the participants viewed the challenges, influencing not only how the participants experienced their beliefs, but also cultivating their perceptions related to the multigrade and rural contexts. The participants' references to isolation, time, and learners suggested these forces are constructs that would require a different approach in addressing them—in comparison with urban issues. The data suggested the forces of space, time, and place played a role in how the participants perceived the Department of Basic Education and their officials, as well as what the DBE and its officials could do to address the issues. It is therefore argued that what is required is a different perspective on rurality by taking cognisance of the generative theory of rurality in order to assist with possible social change by means of cultivating a different perspective on resources as well as agency.



It became evident that one has to take into consideration that the first-order (micro, individual), second-order (meso, school), and third-order (macro, system-wide) typology cannot be interpreted in a similar manner within the multigrade context as in the monograde context. This is due to the fact that not only is there a rural–urban disjuncture, but the number of teachers within each system is also different. Large urban schools, for example, could probably assist their staff with support—support one another— whereas in the multigrade context there are, in many instances, only one or two teachers at the same school. This then becomes a support challenge. The curriculum seemed to be a major challenge because the multigrade teachers have to implement a monograde-designed curriculum that did not take their context, in which several grades are combined into one class at the same time, into consideration. It is important to note that multigrade was not implemented through choice, but due to necessity. However, in spite of all the challenges there is hope. We intend to follow up in a forthcoming paper, about how the Intel@ Teach intervention assisted this group of multigrade teachers to overcome the majority of the challenges reported here by making use of the generative theory of rurality as lens.

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