

## **Multi-grade (MG) pedagogy and practice: Accelerating sustainable development goals for South Africa**

### **My journey**

As a teacher, I recognise that I have a lot to learn about effective pedagogy. In fact, I hope to be a lifelong learner and a better teacher. I started teaching in a middle school in the North-West province where I learnt a lot about what it means to be a teacher and a lot about myself as a teacher. I studied curriculum development and implementation in my master's and in my PhD. I was particularly interested in teachers' implementation of the curriculum and teachers' professional development. Teaching, to me, is about engaging students in their own learning in a way that allows them to integrate the material they are learning into their own life experiences.

I was appointed as a lecturer at UNISA in 2008. As I gained teaching experience in the Open and Distance Learning environment and confidence in conducting research, I came to regard teaching as my primary professional responsibility. My current position as a professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instructional Studies in the School of Teacher Education confirms this and thus legitimises my efforts to effect changes in curriculum development and implementation. It also places me in a position where I can exert influence. Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educationist, has called such an approach to teaching a liberation pedagogy. This means that professors are no longer the single source of knowledge in the classroom but rather are engaged in helping students to move from being passive recipients to being active creators of knowledge and ideas. As a curriculum specialist, I strive to challenge students' pre-existing knowledge and abilities, to engage them in a critical

look at the world in which they live, and to encourage them to see themselves as actors in the intellectual arena, **a world where thoughts and ideas have both potential and consequences.**

A few years ago, I started taking an interest in multi-grade schools. I had an interesting experience during my PhD study. I was visiting schools to collect data and I noticed that some schools have different grades in one classroom. I was fascinated by the learner diversity that existed in those contexts. This certainly applied to learners' intellectual abilities as well as their socio and cultural backgrounds. That's when I became curious and needed to know more about these schools. This interest has filtered through to my research projects and guided my leadership of newer academic members. As a result of my initial concern regarding the importance of multi-grade teaching, my talk today is entitled "Multi-grade Pedagogy and practice: Accelerating sustainable development goals for South Africa". It is a culmination of many years of experience and research in this field. It is a field that is close to my heart and an area where I feel I have made the most impact as a scholar and researcher.

## **Introduction**

The citizens of every country are entitled to quality education since it would ensure a better life. Global initiatives such as the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) process, the Education for All (EFA) movement and the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD) highlight the vital role that education plays in improving health, social inclusion and driving economic development in a knowledge-based society. One of the UN Sustainable Development Goals concerns inclusive and equitable education as well as lifelong learning for all. There is no doubt

that if countries in sub-Saharan Africa are to emerge from the colonial legacies, education that is sustainably delivered to all children of schooling age will be a critical engine for success. This proposition is based on some well-grounded assumptions. The first assumption, derived from human capital theory (Coleman 1988), is that an educated population contributes to the socioeconomic development of society as a whole. It is for this reason that international organisations such as the World Bank and the United Nations recommend education as a tool for poverty alleviation and for the promotion of social development. The second assumption, from the social capital theory is that education contributes to the well-being of individuals within the society. Education is the key, not just for economic growth but also for the improvement of health, material welfare, societal and cultural needs.

For education to play these roles, I propose that the foundational premise to drive these ideas should be informed by an African worldview (Ngara 2007). An African worldview, which contextualises an education model to suit the people it is meant to serve and a worldview that takes into account the circumstances in which they are. Shizha (2013) calls for the educational deconstruction and reconstruction using a multi-grade model. Shizha (2013) argues that the problem in Africa is that most decisions on education for development originate from central governments, which have maintained former colonial administrative structures. As a result, educational policies end up being copycats of western models. These copycats gave us monograde as the gold standard of education in Africa. The monograde model has proven to be a recipe for elitism, and alienation for the majority of African children (Kivunja & Sims 2015).

Despite dramatic improvements over the last decade, progress towards the achievement of education for all has stagnated. In developing world countries, many children are denied schooling because of gender, poverty, displacement, nomadism, disability or ethnicity. According to Unesco (2016), in 2014 about 263 million children and youth were out of school of whom 61 million were of primary school age (about 6-11 years). UNESCO referred to these children as “out of school children”. These children lack access to a school in their vicinity. And as much as children like us to believe they don’t like going to school, they do! Often, its only when we don’t have something important that we realise its value.

The monograde approach to education needs a fundamental shift and needs to be replaced by a multi-grade system of education because it is best suited for the African contexts. The multi-grade system of education will deliver a sustainable education as it will make education accessible to all children of primary school age. This is because it can be delivered in rural and even in remote areas where there are typically only a few teachers and schools.

In developed countries, primary education commonly occurs in predominantly monograde classrooms, underpinned by an assumption that children of similar ages are likely to need similar learning opportunities to acquire the knowledge and skills expected of children of that age. In contrast, in the low-income countries, such as those in sub-Saharan Africa, most children, especially in the rural and remote areas, receive education in multi-grade contexts (Kivunja & Wood, 2012.). The study conducted in South Africa by Joubert (2009), showed that many of the teachers in these school’s struggle with accommodating diverse learner needs and are in need

of training in a wide variety of areas such as teaching techniques, classroom management, access to appropriate learning materials, local and regional professional support networks and national policies that are sensitive to, and supportive of, the multi-grade environment.

The National Development Plan 2030 outlines the government's aim to eliminate poverty and reduce inequality by 2030. The plan stresses that each community should have a school, teachers who love teaching and learning and a local library filled with a wealth of knowledge. One of the three priorities of the plan that I want to highlight is that of improving the quality of education, skills development and innovation. Research has shown that many learners in South Africa access basic education through schools that practice multi-grade teaching. These schools are mostly found in rural areas where they are confronted with challenges of poverty, poor infrastructure and limited facilities. Some of these schools are located on private property owned by farmers or churches. I must add that multi-grade teaching is not unique to South Africa and is practiced in both developed and developing countries (Little, 1995). The question I want to explore now is

### **What is multi-grade teaching?**

According to Joubert (2010), the term 'multi-grade' is not universal, but the practice is widespread. Cornish (2014:14) defines multi-grade as classes with two or more grades in the same classroom with the same teacher. According to this definition, multi-grade teaching happens in one classroom where more than one grade is involved in the learning experience. This usually takes place under the supervision

of one teacher. Granted, this may sound like total chaos, but correctly managed, it is a stimulating and enriching environment. In a monograde environment, learners are grouped according to grades with a specific teacher assigned to every grade, or class within that grade. By contrast, learners in a multi-grade school are not grouped and taught in separate classes. Learners of mixed ages, abilities, and different grades are all present at the same time, in the same classroom with one teacher. The children are usually of different ages and competence levels, but they learn and work in one classroom. Many terms are found in the literature to describe multi-grade settings. The terms 'combination classes', 'forced mixed-age classes' and 'forced mixed grades' usually refer to settings arising through necessity and the characteristics of enrolment.

### **Why multi-grade classes exist?**

Multi-grade classes are organised as a matter of necessities for remote areas where the number of children enrolled could not meet the required number to organise a single grade class and assign a teacher for that class. In many African countries, multi-grade teaching is seen as a key pedagogic tool that can assist teachers in the context of teacher shortages, budget constraints and other difficult situations. African countries such as Zambia, Burkina Faso, Botswana, Namibia, South Africa and Uganda practice the multi-grade teaching approach. According to Hyry-Beihammer & Hascher (2015b), multi-grade classes in developing countries enable education that is economically viable especially in rural areas.

### **Characteristics of multi-grade classes**

- a. Teachers split their teaching time between two or more grades

- b. Few learning activities are shared across the grades
- c. They are formed by necessity and by choice
- d. They can be permanent or temporary

A significant difference between conventional classrooms and multi-grade classrooms is that the time table takes on a different role. Where the timetable in a conventional classroom organises learning in a linear manner, the timetable in a multi-grade classroom does not do so. The curriculum itself transforms from one of a fixed sequence to one that is more open across the grades.

### **Advantages and disadvantages of multi-grade classes**

Every system or teaching approach has its own benefits and shortcomings. Therefore, when exploring multi-grade classes, we need to look at their various advantages and disadvantages.

#### **Advantages of multi-grade classes**

- a. The first advantage of multi-grade teaching practice is that it promotes inclusivity and diversity. As such, it is hailed as learner-centred thus promoting high-quality, individualised learning. However, just having learners with diverse needs in the multi-grade class does not make it inclusive. To ensure that the multi-grade class is inclusive, the teacher needs to ensure that all learners are given the opportunity to achieve regardless of their abilities, age, social and cultural backgrounds. This means that the teacher needs to design different activities and use different resources to ensure that different learners' learning styles are accommodated. In an African context, the teacher must familiarise himself/herself with African cultural beliefs, gender issues and racial issues. The teacher would need to instill cultural values such

as humanity and respect. In addition, the teacher needs to give voice and space to learners' diverse perspectives and experiences.

- b. Multi-grade classes also support communal learning: Communal learning or sharing is one of the basic tenets of Ubuntu, promoting that learners work together. Learners of different ages and school experiences can interact and learn from one another (Hryy-Beihammer & Hascher (2015b). The teacher must use teaching styles that inculcate in their learners their individual responsibilities in their communities (Van Wyk 2014). They need to support and learn from each other.
- c. What may be surprising is that learners' academic achievement is positive and there is no significant disadvantage when compared with learner achievement in the monograde class (Veerman, 1995; Cornish, 2006b)
- d. In fact, multi-grade classes promote self-study: Learners become independent and can monitor their own learning. However, Cornish (2014b) argues that although learners are independent, they do still need some form of support from the teacher. Since positive teacher-learner relationships are beneficial, it is important for teachers to care about their learners and provide them with the available resources that they need to complete their individual tasks. Through caring and understanding, learners and their peers can strive towards achieving a common goal. This is referred to as the "pedagogy of care": Each learner must feel validated and respected in the school environment. However, teachers need to be effectively supported so that they can provide an educational environment that is conducive for all learners to thrive in their educational endeavors.



- e. Enhances learners' social skills: The elements of Ubuntu such as respect and dignity are prevalent in multi-grade classrooms. Learners feel interconnected with each other. Through peer teaching, learners feel "togetherness" and a responsibility for each other's learning.
- f. Prepares learners for real life experiences. Learners can learn to assume leading and supportive roles as needed in different work situations

**Despite the advantages associated with multi-grade teaching, there are some disadvantages.**

- a. Multi-grade requires additional preparation on the part of the teacher
- b. It is difficult to keep track of learners' needs in more than one grade.
- c. Learners may receive less individual attention
- d. Learners require more discipline, greater concentration and more focus in order to benefit from effective teaching strategies.
- e. Teachers often feel isolated.
- f. Parents and the community 's involvement is minimal.
- g. Learners require more initiatives and resources to function effectively in a multi-grade class.

### **History of multi-grade teaching in South Africa**

Multi-grade teaching dates back to the origins of formal education, and it was not until the late 1800s that the teaching of one grade at a time in a classroom (monograde) became prominent. Some evidence from earlier SA literature on multi-grade classes exists and multi-grade classrooms is not a new phenomenon in South Africa. However, periodicals on education in South Africa during the past few

decades have yielded significant evidence that educationists have not forgotten the virtues of the “one-room schoolhouse”.

According to Henn (1989), training for multi-grade classes has been largely absent in the syllabus of teacher training in South Africa. In his own teaching experience in multi-grade classes, he found that time management is a serious problem for the teacher of a multi-grade class. He quotes an example of a small rural school where a teacher had to teach four different grades (grades 2, 3, 4 and 5) in one classroom, requiring a total of 103 hours of learning material to be prepared for each 26-hour school week. Van Aswegen’s (1987) research reported that the following three strategies were successfully applied to cope with multi-grade classes:

- (a) the orientation of pupils towards meaningful self-learning activities;
- (b) the application of audiovisual aids such as sound-slide projectors and videos and
- (c) utilizing or recurring elements in the syllabus.

This requires detailed curriculum knowledge on the part of the teacher.

In certain subjects, like religious instruction, the syllabus of the dominant grade level was followed, eventually covering all levels in every four-year cycle, with different methods of evaluation for each grade level. Oral and written composition were taught during double periods. The first part of the period was used for a group discussion involving all grades, and the second part was split into appropriate assignments for each grade level.

In 1998, a team from the HSRC undertook research in the Free State and their findings revealed that a two-roomed school building is typical of the multi-grade

schools encountered in that region. In such a school, there are usually two teachers, one taking the junior grades (Grades 1 to 4) and the other the senior grades (Grades 5 to 7). Revision and repetition are inherent elements of multi-grade classroom teaching and learning.

Due to urbanisation and the increased number of schoolchildren, a monograde education approach was established, whereby learners of the same age were grouped together in classes or grades, and this subsequently became the norm. All teacher education, textbooks, sources and policies, as well as curricula, were established according to monograde principles. It meant that teachers in multi-grade classes had to work with monograde education, support and materials. Unfortunately, these two were not really compatible. Curriculum, learning materials and teacher training are all geared towards single-grade classrooms. Most teachers at these schools have been trained in monograde teaching approaches. Perceptions of many teachers regarding multi-grade teaching in South Africa are that it is demanding and more complex than monograde. The remoteness of many rural schools and the prevailing socio-economic conditions that exist in many of these areas further contribute to negative attitudes among teachers.

According to the Report on the 2014 Annual Survey for Ordinary Schools in South Africa, there are approximately 5 153 public schools with multi-grade classes in the system, that the Department of Basic Education (DBE) is supporting. The largest numbers are found in the KwaZulu-Natal and Limpopo provinces.

| Province | Number of rural schools | Number of secondary schools | Total number of rural schools |
|----------|-------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|
|----------|-------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|

|               |              |              |               |
|---------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|
| Eastern Cape  | 1 498        | 334          | 1 832         |
| Free State    | 375          | 105          | 480           |
| Gauteng       | 120          | 35           | 155           |
| KwaZulu-Natal | 2 895        | 1 145        | 4 040         |
| Limpopo       | 2 167        | 1 175        | 3 342         |
| Mpumalanga    | 202          | 115          | 317           |
| North West    | 288          | 99           | 387           |
| Northern Cape | 140          | 40           | 180           |
| Western Cape  | 507          | 12           | 519           |
| <b>TOTAL</b>  | <b>8 192</b> | <b>3 060</b> | <b>11 252</b> |

Source: Annual School Survey 2014 (Number of ordinary schools having multi-grade classes, by province)

I have to mention that the Department of Basic Education has embarked on a mission to close these schools –this act, compromises learners’ basic right to education in those areas. My argument is that if we still have farm schools, rural areas and villages, multi-grade schools will have to continue to exist. We cannot simply wish them away. The silence of post-apartheid educational policy on multi-grade teaching is a saddening reality. This results in the continued neglect of multi-grade classes and the provisioning of quality education. What we have are discussion documents on the state of these schools and suggestions on what can be done to improve the situation. South African teachers are using the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), which was produced for monograde classrooms. Such a curriculum requires teachers to plan separately for each grade making no provision for multi-grade classes. The majority of MG schools are

characterised by, amongst other issues, lack of resources, insufficient classrooms, and lack of water and sanitation facilities and unavailability of libraries making them uncondusive learning environments.

The Action Plan to 2014: *Towards the Realisation of Schooling 2025* has identified a number of weaknesses within the system that need to be tackled in order to ensure the provision of quality education. The Action Plan also indicates that of all learners in primary schools, 13% find themselves in multi-grade schools. Equally disturbing is that very little guidance has been given to teachers of multi-grade classes, despite the fact that such classes are a widespread phenomenon. According to the plan, teachers who practice multi-grade teaching need special guidance with the curriculum and require specialised in-service training. Like other developing countries in Africa, South Africa's rural communities remain disadvantaged compared to their counterparts in urban areas. The research conducted by the HSRC in 2011 showed that in a school in South Africa, there is only a one in three chance that a student will complete the primary level. This research further points out that more than 8 million South African learners can be found in rural school classrooms.

### **Reasons for multi-grade classes in South Africa**

The Department of Basic Education (DBE, 2015) emphasised that multi-grade is a viable option and it was introduced in South Africa for the following reasons:

- a. It will increase access to education in disadvantaged areas

Learners who are residing in rural areas are given an opportunity to attend schools that are nearer to their communities. Brown (2010) argues that multi-grade schools increase primary school participation rate.

- b. It will maximise the use of scarce educational resources.,ensuring sharing and the cost-effective use of available resources.

Sharing is one of the virtues of Ubuntu. The philosophy of Ubuntu acknowledges that people have different qualities, talents and resources, and these should be shared in a spirit of cooperativeness for positive living (Sotuku & Duku, 2014). Resources are the most valuable tools to ensure effective teaching and learning. It is the teacher's responsibility to ensure that learners in multi-grade classes are provided with resources. For example, the teacher could liaise with community members to find resources that can be used in teaching and learning.

- c. It may assist in dealing with educator absenteeism particularly in the context of the HIV/Aids epidemic impact.
- d. It may help to alleviate the chronic shortage of teachers.
- e. It may have an effect on the inadequate number and sizes of classrooms.

No learner is supposed to be without a teacher. As a result, schools need to combine grades that have fewer learners to make up an average class size. In some instances, where the teacher-learner ratio is low and the number of teachers are reduced, the grades can be combined to increase access to learning in understaffed schools.

- g. It may assist in dealing with the population size

In some instances, the communities may be far away from larger schools and children may be too young to travel to those schools on their own.

### **Challenges of multi-grade classes in the South African context**

The Department of Basic Education argues that the provision of education in multi-grade schools is beset by a number of challenges that negatively influence the provision of quality teaching and learning in those schools. According to literature, teachers' perception of multi-grade classes is predominantly negative. Some of the challenges as suggested by the DBE (2015) include:

- a. A lack of teacher training on multi-grade teaching and hence a reliance on experiential learning
- b. Schools that are poorly resourced
- c. A lack of curriculum adaptation
- d. Planning requirements that are the same as for monograde classes
- e. Limited exposure to suitable teaching strategies
- f. An absence of specific support for multi-grade teachers
- g. A low learner population in classes or overcrowded classes in certain instances
- h. A low level of learner performance in certain instances
- i. Inadequate infrastructure

- j. Inadequate number of teachers, especially in the “one-teacher” schools and
- k. Shortage of textbooks designed for multi-grade teaching

In spite of the challenges mentioned above, teachers in multi-grade contexts need to ensure that learners are not disadvantaged and are given the opportunity to learn.

### **Community Engagement**

I believe that engagement is an important teaching component. The university regards it as a scholarly activity alongside academic research and teaching. Community engagement involves external communities and stakeholders in collaborative activities to address South Africa’s development imperatives. I am currently involved in three community engagement projects, two of which I lead. These two projects target teachers’ professional development in multi-grade classes. The research is conducted in two provinces namely, Limpopo and North West. The research team consists of my colleagues Dr Motitswe (Inclusive Education), Ms Nkalane and Mr Mukhati from CIS and Prof Ramorola from the Department of Science and Technology. The purpose of the project is to explore the assessment practices in MG classrooms and to design strategies that would enhance assessment practices in MG.

Assessment remains an important part of teaching and learning. Neglecting assessment in multi-grade schools could have a negative influence on the provision



of quality education and undermine equity in education provisioning. The literature directly relating to assessment in multi-grade classrooms is minimal (Hargreaves 2001; Berry 2010 & Joubert 2007). The project aims to fill this gap. In order to improve teaching in multi-grade classes, greater support mechanisms and staff development programmes for assessment in multi-grade teaching contexts must become a priority. It is anticipated that the project will highlight the need for the development of a comprehensive assessment programme for multi-grade teachers. Furthermore, the findings of this study will inform policy review or formulation to enhance the implementation of existing assessment practices and teaching in multi-grade schools. It will also contribute towards bringing the practice into prominence and giving much-needed coherence to mono and multi-grade teaching in the teacher education system. Research has shown that assessment remains a challenge for most teachers. You can imagine that the challenges are heightened in MG schools. Our research findings revealed that differentiation at the level of assessment is a challenge, assessment is done haphazardly and feedback is rarely given due to lack of time. The intervention strategies that are in place include conducting a one-week workshop to train teachers on assessment strategies that are relevant to their context.

The research team is planning to incorporate emerging technologies to enhance teaching and learning in multi-grade schools. One may think that it would not be possible given the context of multi-grade schools particularly in rural and farming communities and one would be tempted to be cynical about this vision. However, South Africa is a sunny region; therefore, solar energy can be harnessed to provide energy to these schools. Technology can *mediate professional isolation and*

*communication challenges*. The challenges of long distance travel can be addressed by using email, teleconferencing, 'skype technologies' and social network platforms such as twitter, Facebook and WeChat to *enhance teaching and learning in multi-grade classrooms*. For example, when teaching the *History of Transport* in geography, learners can gather around the computer screen and access content, both text and pictures, from *Microsoft Encarta*. When teaching the section on *Vertebrate & Invertebrate Animals* in natural sciences, learners can even see the creatures in action as well as hear the sounds of the wild. These experiences can be amplified by using a data projector (DBE 2015).

## **Collaboration**

In my quest to gain more in-depth knowledge about multi-grade schools, I was fortunate to be one of the beneficiaries of the Vision Keeper program from the research directorate here at UNISA. The program was aimed at enhancing scholarship through mentorship. I collaborated with a renowned scholar in the field of rural education, Prof Linley Cornish from the University of New England, in New South Wales Australia. Through this collaboration, I was able to visit multi-grade schools in Australia. I wanted to know what they are doing to make their multi-grade schools a success. They also have one-teacher schools just like us. The lessons learnt include the following:

- a. Their curriculum design supports multi-grade teaching
- b. Number of learners in their classrooms is low – e.g. 8 learners
- c. Schools are highly resourced
- d. Technology is used to promote individual learning

Just like in the case of our multi-grade teachers, there is no training specifically designed for teachers within that setting in Australia either. Teachers learn on the move.

A further result of this collaboration is the pending book we are editing entitled “Perspectives in multi-grade teaching”. A significant aspect of this book is that it will contain both local and international perspectives on multi-grade teaching.

My belief is that if key stakeholders in education can adequately supply rural primary schools with teaching-learning resources to help facilitate the teachers’ work in these difficult contexts, multi-grade schools will be successful. The provision of adequate and suitable learning material, textbooks and well-equipped libraries would help enhance teachers’ work and thus improve student learning outcomes. Learners have the right to education and the Department of Education is obliged to supply schools with resources. The Constitution of South Africa emphasises that the state must ensure the progressive realisation of the right to education by mobilising resources in schools.

Furthermore, I am currently working with the North-West University (Potch campus) to design a multi-grade module for the Bachelor of Education degree program for primary school teachers. I am also a co-editor of the book that will be used by the students in this program. This is an attempt to ensure that teachers are able to handle these classes. It is my fervent wish and prayer, Prof Magano, that as much as UNISA prides itself in producing more than 50% of teachers in the country, that multi-grade teaching will become central to our teacher preparation programs. This will ensure that our teachers are relevant and that they can address the needs of our learners, especially those in rural areas. Pre-service teachers should be taught the

concept of multi-grade teaching, the history of multi-grade schooling in South Africa and the importance of multi-grade classrooms in an effort to provide universal primary education especially to children in the rural and remote areas. There is a need for our education students to be equipped with multi-grade teaching strategies as well as assessment guidelines. In most instances, teachers always mention the unavailability of teaching resources. I find this absurd. However, I believe universities need to teach students how to use locally available resources to make a wide range of teaching and learning aids and when and how to use them. This will ensure that graduates are more effective in multi-grade classrooms. UNISA should produce teachers who are competent in applying multi-grade teaching strategies especially primary teachers. This recommendation is supported by UNESCO (2013). UNESCO mentions that the demand for primary teachers will exceed supply by 2.1 million by 2030 when the newly introduced Sustainable Development Goals expire. This means by 2030 Sub-Saharan African, including SA will require more teachers in primary schools. It also means that if the current practice of training teachers in monograde continues, South Africa will face a huge problem of dealing with large numbers of learners in multi-grade primary schools.

Given the above situation, I need to acknowledge the efforts by the Department of Basic Education. Recently the department has begun to think of strategies to support multi-grade teachers as part of its rural education strategy. The Department of Basic Education introduced a Multi-Grade Toolkit to support teachers in the delivery and mediation of the curriculum. The toolkit was developed and finalised in December 2014. The purpose of the toolkit is:

- To give guidance to teachers on how to approach curriculum delivery in multi-grade settings;
- To strengthen curriculum implementation in multi-grade classes through planning and assessment and
- To improve learner performance in all subjects.

In addition, the Department of Basic Education in collaboration with the British Council are currently piloting the Learn English Audio Project (LEAP) in three provinces namely, Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Mpumalanga. The project targets 168 schools, 327 teachers and 24 subject.

The LEAP project is aimed at improving the teaching and learning of English First Additional Language in multi-grade schools. The goal of the project is to effect change in classroom practice using audio materials. According to DBE (2015), the objectives of the project are:

- To support teachers with a reliable means of playing audio content in their English classes;
- To increase the use of relevant audio resources for the development of listening and speaking skills;
- To enable learners to self-access audio resources;
- To enable teachers to manage multi-grade classes effectively; and
- To ascertain any changes in the use of English (listening, speaking, reading and writing) by learners and teachers.

I would like to commend the Department of Education as well as Professor Mackay and her team for designing the language workbooks issued to learners. The

workbooks promote individual learning, which is the dominant teaching method in multi-grade context. Learners in this context spend time without their teacher, therefore, these workbooks ensure that learners take responsibility for their own learning and develop independent learning skills. This endeavor speaks directly to the aim of the National Development Plan (2030).

### **Research and Capacity building**

Another domain in which I have gained experience over the past few years is the research domain. My research interests span a broad range of interesting topics including rural education-multi-grade teaching in particular, curriculum development and implementation, reflective practice and professional development. These topics allow me to link my research and teaching and to design interesting projects that can attract and engage academics and students. Moreover, since these topics require an interdisciplinary approach, they might be of interest to colleagues and students in other disciplines too. It is imperative to point out that multi-grade teaching is at the centre of my research. I believe that all teaching and learning can be multi-grade or differentiated because one can find a range of abilities and needs even within one grade. Therefore, all teachers need multi-grade teaching skills. My publication record, the citations to my publications, as well as previous work experience reflect these interests. Furthermore, my desire to collaborate with students translates into the research domain — one of my papers, a work-in-progress, is co-authored with my PhD student. It is my goal to share the excitement, dedication and hard work that are part of research with my students. My teaching and my research are thus closely intertwined.

My research goal is to contribute to the development of educated, skilled and capable South Africans, thus promoting human development and supporting an inclusive economic growth plan. Over the past eight years, my research interests have focused on multi-grade teaching and professional development in multi-grade schools. I investigate pedagogical practices in a multi-grade context, inclusion and diversity in a multi-grade context, and assessment. My research is theoretically informed by social constructivist views. Even more important, my research is guided by the principles of sociocultural and historic context since they are important in the study of the phenomenon.

In one of my research papers, I explored MG teachers' experiences in their particular schools. My main focus was on their conceptualisation of multi-grade, how they implement the curriculum and the challenges they face. The findings of my study revealed that teachers' understanding of multi-grade is minimal. They view multi-grade as a temporary situation, believing that if they get more teachers their situation will change. Their practices display a lack of curriculum adaptation; their training is geared towards monograde and the teachers felt isolated and neglected. Human and physical infrastructure was also of concern to these teachers. I have serious concerns regarding the likelihood of the achievement of the projections in the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development.

In 2005 two reports were released, namely the Emerging Voices report, commissioned by the Nelson Mandela Foundation, and the Report of the Ministerial Committee on Rural Education. Both highlighted the complexities and challenges faced by rural and farm schools. The Report of the Ministerial Committee on Rural Education (2005:3) notes that 'colonialism and apartheid left an indelible print on all

aspects of rural life through land dispossessions, resettlement policies, and systematic exclusion from opportunities to improve personal and social wellbeing that made poverty the most endemic characteristic of rural areas'. The two reports recommended that the way forward is to address the past imbalances in education for rural people. Based on these recommendations, the Department of Basic Education conducted public hearings during July 2009 commissioned by the South African Minister of Education, Mrs Angie Motshekga. This also emphasised the need for teacher development and support in multi-grade teaching. The DBE has been working with provincial education departments to develop a National Framework for Quality Education in Rural Areas.

There are strong factors that suggest that the need for multi-grade teaching will remain a permanent feature of education in South Africa. The required paradigm shift from a teacher-centered to a learner-centered approach could be appropriately addressed by multi-grade teaching. Small, scattered settlements will always have a problem providing education for these population groups, but multi-grade teaching can make it possible to provide basic education for such populations. As nomadic people in other countries strive towards basic education, so does South Africa. Further, by its very nature, multi-grade teaching encompasses teacher development, curriculum reform, language issues, learning, support materials and tutor pedagogic awareness.

With the support of the Department of Basic Education in the North-West Province, I managed to conduct a workshop for multi-grade teachers in the province. Seeing that there is a dire need for teachers in multi-grade schools to familiarise themselves



with multi-grade teaching pedagogies, I designed a short course, which is offered by the Centre for Continued Professional Development. The aim was to ensure that teachers are prepared for the realities that they will face. I must say Dr Mohapi, I was hoping that this course would attract many in-service teachers, but regrettably, teachers still regard multi-grade as temporary. We all know that no one wants to invest in something that might go away. The truth is, multi-grade teaching is here to stay.

### **Implication**

It is becoming an imperative to acknowledge that the likelihood is high that teachers will be placed in multi-grade classrooms. Realistically, a teacher will work in a multi-grade classroom at some point in his/her career. One student in a class might need to work at a grade below or above the rest of the class in a particular subject area. In a multi-grade context, teachers are expected to teach at the level of the child and not at the level of the grade in which the child is. Multi-grade teaching makes provision for just that.

Despite the positioning of multi-grade as a less desirable educational strategy, multi-grade grouping occurs frequently. It makes sense that if sustainable development goals and Education for All (EFA) goals are to be realised, multi-grade schooling needs to be seen as a potential engine to drive this revolution.

**Multi-grade teaching is an authentic pedagogy in its own right.**

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**Thank You!**

