

Multi-grade teaching in South Africa

Dr Jurie Joubert

In order to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), specifically the first two which focus on reducing hunger and poverty by half and ensuring universal primary education (UPE) by 2015, we need to change the traditional working modalities of international aid agencies and address the needs of the world's biggest neglected majority – rural people.

The plight of the rural poor

Like other developing countries in Africa, South Africa's rural communities remain disadvantaged compared to their counterparts in urban areas. Once in a school in South Africa, there is only a one in three chance that a student will complete primary level. More than 8 million children can be found in rural school classrooms in South Africa.

One of the major inequalities affecting the rural poor is their unequal access to quality education, which is so important for social and economic development. The reduction of poverty, as well as food security and basic education, form the core of the new discourse of development aid. However, the rural nature of these challenges is often overlooked. Poverty and illiteracy remain and poverty hits children hardest. While a severe lack of goods and services hurts every human, it is most threatening to children's rights. It creates an environment that is damaging to their development in every way – mental, physical, emotional and spiritual.

Illiteracy often coincides with poverty and hunger, with problems of child and maternal health and with greater exposure to HIV/AIDS. It is primarily a rural phenomenon, with implications for the achievement of sustainable development. As a result, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and UNESCO launched the global Education for Rural People (ERP) flagship partnership during the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in 2002 in Johannesburg.

What is multi-grade teaching?

The term 'multi-grade teaching' (MGT) is not universal, but the practice is widespread. Multi-grade teaching, or multi-level teaching, refers to the teaching of children of different grade levels at the same time in the same setting. Many terms are found in the literature to describe multi-grade settings. The terms 'combination classes', 'forced mixed-age classes' and 'forced mixed grade' usually refer to settings arising through necessity and the characteristics of enrolment.

Multi-grade teaching is not unique to South Africa and is prevalent both in developed and developing countries (Little, 1995). 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.

According to the Centre for Multigrade Education (CMGE), multi-grade teaching is used in approximately 7,000 South African schools, with most of these schools located in rural areas (Baseline Study, CMGE, 2009). This is the sad reality for 30 per cent of all primary schools in South Africa, affecting nearly 3 million of our country's children. They will never be able to compete with their peers in the towns and cities, they will never get even close to a tertiary institution, and they will never become part of the economy. Eighty per cent will drop out before they reach Grade 12. They are being educated to perpetuate the same illiteracy and lack of skills that bind their parents to a lifetime of poverty.

Why multi-grade teaching has failed in so many schools

During urbanisation and the increased numbers of school children, a mono-grade 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, all text books, sources and policies, as well as curricula, were established according to mono-grade principles. It meant that teachers in multi-grade classes had to work with mono-grade education, support and materials. Unfortunately, these two were not really compatible.

Multi-grade teaching has become one of the priority topics of the Working Group on the Teaching Profession (WGTP) agenda in Africa. The reason for bringing this issue onboard is the recognition that multi-grade teaching has a potential to improve the quality of teaching, thus contributing to the global effort of achieving the Education for All (EFA) goals and the education-related MDGs.

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

Most teachers at these schools have been trained in mono-grade teaching approaches. Perceptions of many teachers regarding multi-grade teaching in South Africa are that it is demanding and more complex than mono-grade. The remoteness of many rural schools and the prevailing socio-economic conditions that exists in many of these areas further contributes to negative attitudes among teachers.

It is clear that especially disadvantaged learners in rural multi-grade schools are probably not prepared for the challenges and

opportunities of the future. These learners do not even meet the demands of the basic skills. This means that a learner's future success depends on the place where he or she is born.

For generations, rural multi-grade school children have been in the chains of labourers on farms. Very few escape from it. We don't even talk about participation in a knowledge-driven global economy! We have to prepare our multi-grade learners for a world where the opportunities for success greatly depend on the ability of educationalists to work together on a global scale.

Raising the profile of multi-grade teaching

Multi-grade teaching is a pedagogic approach that offers real opportunities to improve teaching and learning in different learning settings, particularly in the small, scattered and remote rural schools, where the geographic and socio-economic conditions limit government's ability to provide sufficient education services (World Declaration on Multi-Grade Education, March 2010).

Multi-grade teaching is associated with small schools in remote and sparsely populated areas where there may be only one, two or three teachers who can offer a complete cycle of primary education. And yet, potentially, it can ease the problems of education in these cases and should be viewed as:

- a pedagogic approach to increase access and retention, while improving quality education; and
- a strategy to address teacher shortages, particularly in small and remote schools.

Ironically, while multi-grade classes could be a solution for educating rural children, in many African countries, governments tend to focus on improving conventional schools, often leaving the development of multi-grade schools to local initiative. For this reason, multi-grade schools in rural Africa tend to show poor results, which in turn give them a negative image.

The reasons for multi-grade teaching's continued disfavour have to be attributed to the dominance of the present paradigm of schooling as encapsulated in the single-grade approach. Nothing less than a paradigm change is required if multi-grade teaching is to escape the bonds of the present system and be acknowledged as an authentic pedagogy in its own right. It would appear that the philosophical-pedagogical advocacy of the virtues of single-grade teaching has besotted the minds of educationalists at large.

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 dispossession, 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 was to address the past imbalances in education for rural people. Based on these recommendations, the Department of Education 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-centred to a learner-centred 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. So too, for the small, moving populations such as nomadic people. Further, by its very nature, multi-grade teaching encompasses teacher development, curriculum reform, language issues, learning, support materials and tutor pedagogic awareness.

Teacher training and support in multi-grade schools

Teachers in multi-grade schools often face unique challenges and have therefore specific developmental needs. One such need is the challenge to deal effectively with multi-grade teaching. The *Emerging Voices* report highlights the multi-grade dilemma in rural communities. The Report of the Ministerial Committee on Rural Education advocates the development of 'guidelines to build capacity to organise multi-grade classes and teaching'.

The hearings during July 2009 commissioned by the South African Minister of Education, Mrs Angie Motshekga, also emphasises the need for teacher development and support in multi-grade teaching. Teacher development is a key priority area for the department, as

indicated in the Medium Term Strategic Framework and the Ten-Point Plan. The Teacher Development Summit and the report carried out by the Curriculum Implementation Review both provide an outline for areas of focus for targeted and qualitative teacher development and support. They call for in-service teacher training to be targeted where it is most needed, and in particular to improve teachers' subject content and pedagogic content knowledge related to specific curriculum areas. This includes the requirement to provide multi-grade teachers with focused support to interpret the curriculum, and to plan for and manage learning for their special circumstances. They also highlight the fact that no specific training has thus far been provided for teachers in multi-grade schools, and that there is a lack of policy guidance for these teachers.

In short, two matters must be addressed: firstly, there must be a total transformation of the pedagogic practices in the classroom (from continuous education by the teacher to self-directed and supporting learning by the learners); and secondly, the prescribed national curriculum must be adapted to the needs of the methodology of multi-grade school children.

A new approach for teachers in rural areas

By having a totally different approach to education in multi-grade classes, teaching in remote and rural areas can be vastly improved. But it will need the help of teachers, who will be expected to carry out the following.

1. Arrange and organise instructional resources and the physical environment in order to facilitate student learning, independence and interdependence.
2. Develop and implement lesson timetables and routines that promote clear, predictable instructional patterns, especially those that enhance student responsibility for their own learning. Developing independence and interdependence is also stressed.
3. Plan, develop and implement instructional strategies and routines that allow for a maximum of cooperative and self-directed student learning based on diagnosed learners' needs. This also includes the effective use of time.
4. Employ teaching methods that will improve the quality of instruction, including strategies for organising group learning activities across and within grade levels, especially those that develop interdependence and cooperation among learners.
5. Develop skills and strategies in learners that allow for a high level of independence and efficiency in learning individually or in combination with other learners.
6. Develop skills and routines whereby learners serve as 'teachers' to other learners within and across different grade levels.

International recognition of the benefits of multi-grade teaching

The Centre for Multigrade Education (CMGE) was established in 2009 through a grant from the Dutch Government to enhance the development of multi-grade education solutions. The CMGE was approved as a self-governing and funded entity of South Africa's Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT).

An international conference of 110 delegates from senior education and civic society organisations from Botswana, Namibia, Nigeria, South Africa (seven of the nine provinces), Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, Colombia, Iran, India, Sri Lanka, Greece and Australia met in Paarl, South Africa, to explore international best practice in multi-grade education as a viable option to address Millennium Development Goal 2, which is to ensure UPE access to all children by 2015.

The delegates were addressed by world experts from Australia, Colombia, Greece, India, Sri Lanka, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom on the results of successful multi-grade education interventions that have changed the lives of millions of children in thousands of schools in these countries.

The Wellington Declaration on Multi-Grade Education was the first world declaration to address the issue of multi-grade education as a solution to alleviating the marginalisation of rural communities through education. It was unanimously adopted by the delegates of the Southern African Multi-Grade Education Conference on 24 March 2010. The world is finally waking up to the fact that multi-grade teaching can make a significant difference to improving the chances of success for rural primary school children. It must be the way forward.

References

Little, A (1995). *Multigrade Teaching: a Review of Practice and Research*, serial No. 12. Overseas Development Administration, London.

DR JURIE JOUBERT is Director of the Centre for Multigrade Education (CMGE) in Wellington, South Africa. Has widely established roots in rugby administrations and development in South Africa. Collaborates on research projects both internationally and nationally and has promoted postgraduate students in a wide repertoire of fields within education. Jurie Joubert has published widely in academic journals, textbooks and the media, and has addressed international conferences in Germany, the UK, the Netherlands, the USA, Lesotho, Nigeria and Zimbabwe.

Why multi-grade education could help plug the gap in global goals

In Uniondale – a village high up in the mountains in the southern part of the Western Cape, South Africa – there is incredible natural beauty and a tranquil way of life. Yet few people come to the area – the road is too bad and the distances too great. Loneliness and isolation settle among the inhabitants. There are few opportunities for work and many residents leave to work in towns and cities. Few ever return. Under such circumstances poverty is rife – so bad, in fact, that Nelson Mandela once remarked that one can ‘smell’ the poverty.

Here, every morning for the past 27 years, Ms Norman has picked up pupils on a dusty road and then, in the afternoons, has dropped them off again near their homes. Her little school bears the results of poverty and isolation – it is dilapidated and dirty. There are about 19 pupils in this school. They do not attend every day because they have older relatives or younger siblings to care for.

Ms Norman obtained a two-year teacher’s diploma after completing her own schooling. She knows nothing about formal multi-grade education and no subject advisers ever visit her school – they just sympathise with her. It is very far to drive to reach her and the roads are not very good and they do not quite know how to help her with multi-grade classes.

In schools across the world in places as diverse as Finland, Samoa and Guyana, there are schools like this one, where children in different year groups are being taught together by teachers like Ms Norman. Sometimes this is by design. Sometimes it happens out of necessity. This can either be due to a shortage of teachers or where the logistics of schooling can prove a geographical and financial challenge, such as in scattered rural or nomadic communities.

Virgilio Juvane, Education Advisor at the Commonwealth Secretariat, who works in multi-grade teaching, believes that if implemented correctly, multi-grade schools could have huge advantages for a range of education systems – particularly in developing countries.

‘With five years to go, we are struggling to meet the Millennium Development Goals in Education. The proportion of children out of school is almost the same as it was in 2000. The policies that are being adopted to reach marginalised groups are proving to be inadequate. Global policies for “normal” schooling are neglecting those children who require special attention,’ he says.

Normal, or monograde, teaching assumes that all children share the same knowledge and abilities. Multi-grade teaching focuses on the diversified needs of the learner. In such an environment, a teacher will be in charge of up to two or three grades at once in a single classroom. The teacher prepares different tasks for different grades and within their respective groups, students help each other.

But this only works if multi-grade teaching is integrated as an essential component of teacher training programmes and not marginalised as a teaching method. It requires that teachers are properly trained and well supported.

Teacher shortages are a major concern and in many countries this has been compounded by the tragic impact of HIV/AIDS on the profession. Globally, 1.9 million new teacher posts need to be created if Universal Primary Education is to be achieved by 2015. And 8.4 million teachers will have to be recruited and trained to replace existing teachers who leave their posts or retire by 2015. The total need for 10.3 million teachers is a staggering statistic.

‘Multi-grade teaching can be a massive advantage. I see it as a model system that is very much part of the solution to get children into education,’ says Mr Juvane.

In Cape Town, the Centre for Multi-grade Education (CME) was set up in 2009 to support rural schools. It is estimated that around 50 per cent of primary learners in the developing world are being educated in rural schools. In South Africa, for example, one quarter of the children attending primary school are taking their lessons in multi-grade classrooms. Dr Jurie Joubert, Director of CME, says that the biggest challenge to multi-grade teaching is that it is not formally recognised as a proven method: ‘The developing world has not adapted to the reality that millions of children are hidden in rural schools, compounded by a lack of educators,’ he explains.

Jolene, who is only four years old attends Ms Norman’s school. In South Africa, she is too young to attend formal schooling but has to go because there is nobody to look after her at home. Chris is already 18 years old – but there is no work for him – all that remains is to go to school. Ms Norman knows each learner’s situation. She has devoted her life to looking after this community. Her complex and challenging job left her feeling unsupported and stressed.

Then the CME stepped in with multi-grade intervention. It was like a gift from heaven to her, she said. Suddenly there were people who listened to her, who shared the same problems. They gave advice about how to organise her class, how to teach learners the basic skills and she was allocated a tutor to help her in her classroom.

Ms Norman also received materials for use in the classroom – including a telephone and a computer with training in how to use it. She was so grateful because someone had visited her little school for the first time and had understood her and listened to her.

According to Dr Joubert, the benefit of empowering the rural school teacher with multi-grade learning methods will greatly enhance numeracy and literacy skills. ‘In addition, it will support the moral fibre of families in towns and villages, preventing the need to send young children away from their families to bigger towns.’

Multi-grade Workshop, Belize 2009

Thousands of children around the world are taught in multi-grade schools. The practice sits in stark contrast to 'mono-grade' education, prevalent in densely populated areas and developed countries, where teachers look after a single grade. Commonplace among populations in remote areas, multi-grade schools see children of varying grades taught in a single classroom, often by a lone teacher. For a small village community, the advantages of multi-grade teaching are many. Grouping children of different grades together, with a single teacher, means it is possible to fund a small school where otherwise it would have been impractical. Children, who might otherwise be unable to travel to distant schools, are then given the opportunity of an education.

Yet, despite their prevalence, understanding of multi-grade education among government officials, parents and teachers is often lacking.

'If you are teaching ten or twelve children crossing three grades, the perception is that the child in Grade 2 is only going to get a third of the time of the teacher,' says Dawn Quist, a former school teacher who for the last 15 years has worked as an education adviser for the Commonwealth. 'The assumption is that the teacher teaches each of the grades separately. But that is not what multi-grade teaching is about. Sometimes teachers have to teach each grade separately, but this approach should not be used all the time – they could teach the same topic, "soils" for example, across the grades and use differentiated activities within the lesson that suit each grade group.'

Traditional training programmes rarely equip teachers with the skills required for teaching in multi-grade classrooms. Even if they have an element of multi-grade teaching within the training programme, the experience they need through teaching practice is almost impossible to arrange because of the remoteness of multi-grade schools. Multi-grade teaching is an educational practice which, according to Ms Quist, has been 'neglected' by governments and teacher training institutions for many years.

In 2009, Ms Quist was asked to lead a week-long workshop on multi-grade teaching in Belize, where around half the primary schools are multi-grade. Organised by the Commonwealth Secretariat, at the request of the Ministry of Education in Belize, the workshop was attended by around 50 principals, teachers and education officials from across the country to help improve teaching methods.

During the workshop, participants learned how to manage multi-grade classrooms and how to develop multi-grade syllabuses and action plans. They were given a plan to improve a specific area, such as lesson planning, which was particularly important in their school. In addition, curriculum officers learned how to develop material showing teachers how to work with their own national curriculum.

The Belize project was just one prong of a wider Secretariat strategy to widen understanding of multi-grade education among not just teachers but also policy-makers to help improve both teaching methods and government support. The hope was that those present at the workshop would not only learn about useful methods, but would also pass the knowledge on to their colleagues.

Following the Belize workshop, emails from delighted individuals were received. One teacher, Annette Pech, from the district of Belize, wrote: 'I have already modified my lesson planning to utilise the examples in the modules. We will also be meeting next week to discuss our action plans amongst the teaching principals who attended.'

But, according to Ms Quist, the most important reward of all – especially for the teachers themselves – will come when pupils at multi-grade schools do well in exams and go on to further study. Those children who succeed at primary level will get a place in secondary school, not only improving their future career opportunities but also their life chances.