

BRIDGING THEORY AND PRACTICE FOR EQUIPPING STUDENT TEACHERS FOR MULTIGRADE CLASSROOM

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Abstract

Multigrade teaching is prevalent in South African rural classrooms due to low learner enrolment that influences staff establishment. Although there is a theoretical standing incorporated into the teacher education curriculum, however, pre-service teachers find it difficult to apply it in multigrade class realities. Given that multigrade teaching demands distinctive pedagogical knowledge and adaptive teaching strategies. The aim of this study is to investigate how the theoretical and practical elements of multigrade module content contribute to student teachers' readiness for multigrade teaching. A qualitative research design was employed, within an interpretivist paradigm which acknowledges that reality is socially constructed, and knowledge is best understood through the subjective experience of the individual. Purposive sampling was used to select 25 student teachers enrolled for a multigrade module in Learner Support. Data were generated through the semi-structured individual interviews method, which allowed participants to respond to questions related to their learning experiences in relation to their application in multigrade classrooms. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data, revealing key themes such as pedagogical understanding, resource management, and contextual adaptability. The findings demonstrate that multigrade teaching significantly contributes to bridging the gap between theory and practice by fostering reflective thinking, collaboration, and an appreciation of classroom diversity. Nevertheless, participants expressed the need for increased practical exposure and contextualized learning opportunities. The study concludes that aligning the multigrade module content more closely with real-classroom experiences can enhance student teachers' professional preparedness and pedagogical competence.

Keywords: *Learner support, multigrade teaching, multigrade classroom, student teachers.*

1. Introduction and background of the study

In South Africa, multigrade teaching remains a prevalent practice, particularly in rural areas where educational resources are limited. Joubert (2015) defines multigrade teaching as the simultaneous instruction of learners from different grade levels within the same classroom. This approach is characterised by the necessity to teach multiple grades concurrently, as noted by Makoele and Malindi (2014). Historically, multigrade teaching has been implemented in various countries over the years, reflecting a global response to resource scarcity in educational settings (Makoele & Malindi, 2014). Taole and Mncube (2016) emphasise that this method is especially common in rural regions of developing countries, serving as a strategy to attain universal primary education. In South Africa, multigrade teaching is a significant practice, especially in rural provinces such as the Eastern Cape, Limpopo, and KwaZulu-Natal (Taole, Mudau, Majola, & Mukhati, 2024; Taole, 2019). These areas are affected by low enrolment rates as learners often migrate to urban centres for better educational opportunities (Taole, 2019).

The Department of Basic Education (DBE, 2015) outlines the primary objectives of multigrade education as enhancing access to learning opportunities for learners in disadvantaged areas and making optimal use of limited educational resources. Within this context, student teachers enrolled in the Multigrade Teaching and Learner Support (MTLS212) module are being prepared for the complexities of multigrade teaching and the provision of learner support. However, many students continue to face challenges in applying the acquired knowledge and skills in practical multigrade classroom settings. These difficulties are evident in their responses to various academic tasks, including oral discussions, written assignments, case studies, and the support they are expected to provide during Work-Integrated Learning (WIL). As lecturers, we have observed that students still struggle to engage effectively with the pedagogical practices required in multigrade teaching environments and in offering appropriate learner support, with many of these educators coming from rural backgrounds. While the literature on multigrade classrooms

reveals various interpretations, Kalender and Erden (2021) define multigrade classrooms as educational settings where instruction is delivered simultaneously to learners from different grade levels.

Student teachers Mosito (2023) defines student teachers as individuals in the final year of the four-year Bachelor of Education (BEd) programme. This definition assumes that these students are in the process of successfully completing the requirements for the BEd degree for which they are registered. In the context of this project, "student teachers" specifically refers to those enrolled in the BEd programme who are also registered for the MTLs 212 module. The students are enrolled at North-West University, undertaking their studies under the supervision of lecturers from the three campuses, with the goal of qualifying for a degree in education.

This study is underpinned by Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978) and further informed by Lave and Wenger's (1991) Communities of Practice (CoP) framework. Vygotsky emphasizes that learning is a social process mediated by interaction, language, and shared experiences. In the context of preparing for multigrade teaching, collaboration between lecturers and student teachers can be seen as a form of mediated learning where knowledge is co-constructed through guided participation and meaningful dialogue. The Communities of Practice framework supports this by positioning learning as a process of social participation. Through structured collaboration, both lecturers and student teachers engage in joint activities, share resources, and develop a shared repertoire of strategies suited for the complexity of multigrade classrooms.

2. Design

A design on bridging theory and practice for equipping student teachers for multigrade classrooms. A research design is a blueprint for collecting and analysing the data necessary to systematically answer the research question (Bertram and Christiansen, 2014). "The overall purpose of basic qualitative research is to understand how people make sense of their lives and their experiences" (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015.) A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate as it allows for an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences, perspectives, and practices in their natural contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Basic qualitative research will be employed because the researcher is interested in how participants interpret their experiences, construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences. According to Nieuwenhuis (2020), qualitative research focuses on understanding social and cultural contexts that underpin distinct behavioural patterns.

A qualitative research design was employed, within an interpretivist paradigm which acknowledges that reality is socially constructed, and knowledge is best understood through the subjective experience of the individual (Nieuwenhuis, 2020). Purposive sampling was used to select 25 student teachers enrolled for a multigrade module in Learner Support. Data were generated through the semi-structured individual interviews method, which allowed participants to respond to questions related to their learning experiences in relation to their application in multigrade classrooms. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data, revealing key themes such as pedagogical understanding, resource management, and contextual adaptability.

3. Objective

The main objective that guided this study is: To investigate how the theoretical and practical elements of multigrade module content contribute to student teachers' readiness for multigrade teaching.

4. Methods

An interpretive phenomenological approach was employed to explore how theory and practice are bridged in equipping student teachers for multigrade classrooms. As noted by Alase (2017), this approach enables participants to make meaning of their lived experiences in relation to the phenomenon under investigation. The population for this study comprised student teachers registered for the Multigrade and Learner Support module as part of their 2026 studies at North-West University, Vanderbijlpark Campus, South Africa. Purposive sampling was used, with a sample of 25 Foundation Phase student teachers selected for participation. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, during which structured guiding questions were provided to participants. The data were analysed using thematic analysis, following the phases proposed by Braun and Clarke, to describe how theory and practice are integrated in preparing student teachers for multigrade classroom contexts.

5. Data presentation and discussion

We presented data that emerges from semi-structured interviews. The letter PL1-PL25 to represent participants. The following themes emerged:

Theme 1: Insufficient practical Exposure in Initial teacher education

Student teachers believe that to bridge the gap between theory and practice, they need more time to do practical work than theory, it will help them to implement their skills when they arrive at schools during teaching practice (Allsopp, DeMarie, Alvarez-McHatton, & Doone, (2006).

The participants were given semi-structured interviews questions where they were supposed to answer, such as how you experience as students in multigrade teaching as means of bridging the gap between theory and practices. *During my experience as student's teacher, I saw that the gap is still gap, because of the theory that we are leaning. When we arrive at school there is a lot of work to teach more than one grade in same class with the knowledge, we received only four months PL1.*

I think we need to have this module as year module; it will help us to do more practical work. PL5

Theme 2: The need for extended practical training to support Skill implementation in schools

Student teachers believe that to bridge the gap between theory and practice, they need more time to do practical work than theory, it will help them to implement their skills when they arrive at schools during teaching practice (Allsopp, DeMarie, Alvarez-McHatton, & Doone, (2006).

What are the challenges do you experience as student teacher during teaching practice while teaching multigrade class? *My change is classroom management, time management, resources PL8. My challenge is resources and time management PL10. Classroom management, time and resources PL11.*

The participants reflect that they have challenges while teaching multigrade classes, most of their challenges are classroom management, time management and resources. It means they need more practical, where they can learn more about time management while teaching multigrade classes (Nawab & Baig, 2011).

6. Conclusion

The overall findings indicate that student teachers require increased time for practical engagement. Extended practical exposure enables them to gain meaningful experience and develop essential teaching skills. Such engagement also encourages student teachers to reflect on theoretical knowledge and apply it effectively in practice. Consequently, the potential to fully bridge the theory–practice gap in initial teacher education depends on enhanced practical exposure and context-specific preparation

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