Research Report

Teaching Literacy and Numeracy in Multigrade Classes in Rural and Farm Schools in South Africa

Prepared by the Education Policy Consortium
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Preface

The release of the report of the Ministerial Committee on Rural Education in 2005 drew attention to difficulties faced by South African rural schools, including the challenges of teachers having to deal with multigrade classes. The report called for support strategies that would take into account specific needs of multigrade schools.

In 2007, the Education Policy Consortium (EPC) initiated a research study to understand the teaching practices and challenges facing multigrade education in South Africa. This research study formed part of the research programme, *Improving the quality of education in South Africa: The literacy and numeracy challenge*, funded by the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands.

The current research report turns a focus onto one of the neglected features of our education system. It suggests that the continued neglect of multigrade education undermines both social justice and the transformation project in our society.

The report is intended for a diverse audience with interest in education and training, including education department officials, members of parliament, members of provincial legislatures, teacher training institutions, teachers and teacher unions.

It is hoped that the current report will provide readers with insights into the realities of multigrade education and the experiences and challenges of teachers and learners in such contexts, which will enable them to participate in debates on the issue as well as contribute to strategies that will ensure that such schools are supported accordingly.
Abbreviations and acronyms

AIDS  Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome
Ave  Average
CAPS  Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement
CEPD  Centre for Education Policy Development
CERT  Centre for Education Rights and Transformation
CPTD  Continuing Professional Teacher Development
DBE  Department of Basic Education
DoE  Department of Education
EC  Eastern Cape
EFA  Education for All
EMIS  Education Management Information Systems
EN  Escuela Nueva
EPC  Education Policy Consortium
EPU  Education Policy Unit
FS  Free State
GT  Gauteng
Gr  Grade
Grade R  Reception Year
HIV  Human Immunodeficiency Virus
ICS  Institutional Curriculum Support
ICT  Information and Communications Technology
IPET  Initial Professional Education for Teachers
KZ  KwaZulu-Natal
LiEP  Language in Education Policy
LO  Learning Outcome
LoLT  Language of Learning and Teaching
LP  Limpopo
LTSM  Learning and Teaching Support Material
MG  Multigrade
MoG  Monograde
MP  Mpumalanga
MUSE  Multigrade School Education
NC  Northern Cape
NCS  National Curriculum Statement
NW  North West
PED  Provincial Education Department
PPN  Post Provisioning Norms
QIDS UP  Quality Improvement, Development, Support and Upliftment Programme
SA  South Africa
SASA  South African Schools Act
UNESCO  United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
WC  Western Cape
1. Introduction

The purpose of this research is to contribute to improving literacy and numeracy through understanding the practices of and opportunities and challenges presented by multigrade education. In addition, the project seeks to make policy recommendations to improve the provision of quality education, especially in rural contexts.

The research and recommendations were framed by a number of assumptions:

- Education is important, not only for its economic benefits but also for its social, political and cultural benefits.
- Education enhances the ability of citizens to participate in democratic processes, and it is a right of every child.
- Multigrade education is a strong but neglected feature of the South African education system.
- Education policies need to be designed taking cognisance of the specific contexts in which they are to be implemented. One-size-fits-all approaches should be avoided.
- Multigrade classes are a strong indicator of the inequalities and inequities of the South African system. It is crucial that all learners be given equal opportunities to attain quality education.

Multigrade schools are commonly, but not exclusively, situated in black rural communities and farm areas. The excerpt below provides a sense of the poverty and neglect of rural areas in South Africa:

‘Emakhaya’ refers to remote rural areas, distant, undeveloped, underdeveloped. Those in a different class or geographical zone can use the word in a derogatory manner; but the word ‘emakhaya’ also denotes home, seeming to suggest a simple, rustic existence. ‘It is [also] where you find amakhosi and izinduna’. ‘Emaphandleni’ is simply ‘dust and deprivation’. The literal translation of ‘kwanjayiphume’ is to chase the dog out of the house. As a condition of want, it suggests and has come to mean that there is so little food that there is not enough to share with a dog or animal because people themselves have insufficient to eat. So the word has both a literal and figurative meaning that point in the same direction. This concept is not spatially bound as ‘emakhaya’ seems to be. (Nelson Mandela Foundation 2005: 31)

How did this situation come about? Rural underdevelopment in South Africa is the result of colonialism, apartheid, and policies of land dispossession pursued by various colonial and racist governments. For example, the land acts of 1913 and 1936 (the 1913 Natives Land Act, and the 1936 Native Trust and Land Act) were instrumental in putting land ownership into white hands and were also the building blocks of the so-called homeland system. By the time the first democratic elections were held in 1994, only 14% of the land was owned by black people, while 86% was owned by whites.
There are strong inter-relationships between rural underdevelopment, poverty and education, and these inter-relationships provide the broad context for the schools at which our research was conducted. Supporting the education of poor communities through various strategies means tackling the legacies of apartheid and building democracy. According to the Report of the Ministerial Committee on Rural Education:

Rural schooling must work in tandem with development programmes. On the one hand, approaches to development currently stress investment in human capital and increasingly recognise basic education as a starting point of successful rural development. On the other hand, if addressed in isolation from other economic and social investments that take place in depressed and stagnant areas where job opportunities are not available, educational progress might contribute to accelerating migration to urban areas. (Ministry of Education 2005: 9)

It is our argument, therefore, that education in multigrade schools must be understood in the context of rural development.

1.1 Conceptions of multigrade education

There are two conceptions of multigrade education. One conception sees it as teaching learners who are in different grades in one class by one teacher (Little, Pridmore, Bajracharya & Vithanapathirana 2006; Berry, n.d.; Birch & Lally 1995). While this situation usually involves grades close to each other – such as Grades 1 and 2, 3 and 4 – in some countries, such as Pakistan and Australia, it can involve grouping learners in up to six grades (Birch & Lally 1995). Multigrade classes in this sense are also known as multi-level classes, ‘multiple classes’, ‘composite classes’ and classes in ‘unitary schools’ (Juvane 2005; Kyne 2005). This is the definition we use in this study.

The other conception of multigrade education extends the definition to include monograde classes, by virtue of the fact that learners are not homogeneous in terms of their ages and abilities. As Juvane (2005: 3) contends: “Even in a monograde class with just one grade group, there is always a considerable range of interests, abilities, maturity and needs”. On the basis of this view he concludes that “all teachers in all classrooms should consider themselves multigrade teachers”.

In South Africa, there is also a view that all schools are multigrade because of the vastly different language competences of the learners, which affects their ability to learn.

1.2 Extent of multigrade education

Multigrade education goes back as far as the origins of Western formal education in Europe and North America (Brunswic & Valérien 2004) and the initiation schools in Africa (Mgadla 2003). Multigrade schools are found in developing and developed countries alike. Today they are part of school systems throughout the world (Little 1995). Multigrade teaching is largely practised in elementary and primary schools (Little 2006; Brunswic & Valérien 2004) in mainly rural – but also sometimes in urban – schools.
Multigrade education is said to be more prevalent in Latin America, Asia and Northern countries and less prevalent in Africa (Brunswic & Valérien 2004). While this may be the case, it is important to note that data on multigrade education are not systematically collected in many developing countries. The following statistics provide indicators of the extent of multigrade education:

- In England in 2000: 25.4% of all classes in primary education.
- In France in 2000: 34% of primary schools.
- In Ireland in 2001: 42% of primary school classes.
- In Norway in 2000: 34% of all primary schools.
- In Nepal in 1998: almost all primary classes.
- In Peru: 23,419 (73%) of all primary schools (Ames 2007).
- In India in 1986: 84% of primary schools had three or fewer than three teachers (Little 2001), making multigrade teaching inevitable.
- In The Netherlands: 53% of primary school teachers teach in multigrade classes (Commissie Evaluatie Basisonderwijs 1994).
- In Finland: a third of primary schools have 50 or fewer than 50 learners, thereby necessitating multigrade teaching (Kyne 2005).
- In Austria: about 25% of primary schools are one- to three-room schools (Kyne 2005; Nösterer 1991).
- In Greece: 31% of primary schools are multigrade (Kyne 2005).
- In the Czech Republic: 35% of primary schools are multigrade (Brozove, cited in Kyne 2005).

The data above suggest some consistency in developed countries, with the extent of multigrade schools and classes ranging from 25% to 42%. This contrasts with the high prevalence exhibited by developing countries such as Nepal, Peru and India. Despite the widespread prevalence of multigrade teaching, there is generally little official acknowledgement of its existence. As Little (1995: 5) puts it:

In general...it would appear that a monograde organisation of schools remains the taken-for-granted assumption of most of those who research and advise on curriculum development in both developed and developing countries. Multigrade teaching is assumed as either not to exist, or to exist but to be invisible, or to exist at the margins but to be non-problematic, or to be recognised as problematic but non-resolvable and therefore best not mentioned!

This view applies to the South African situation. While there are some actions taken towards addressing multigrade teaching issues, these remain uncoordinated and curtailed, as is pointed out later (Section 4).

1.3 Multigrade education – a necessity or a choice

Multigrade education is said to arise from either necessity or choice (Brunswic & Valérien 2004; Little 2005). In cases where multigrade teaching arises from necessity this is determined by factors such as the following (Little 2005: 4-5):

- Schools in areas of low population density where schools are widely scattered and inaccessible and enrolments are low. Schools may have one or two teachers for all grades.
- Schools that comprise a cluster of classrooms spread across different locations, in which some are multigrade classes and others are monograde classes.
• Schools in areas where the learner and teacher numbers are declining, and where previously there was monograde teaching.
• Schools in areas of population growth and school expansion, where enrolments in the expanding upper grades remain small and teacher numbers are low.
• Schools in areas where parents send their children to more popular schools within reasonable travelling distance, leading to a decline in the potential population of learners and teachers in the less popular school.
• Schools in which the number of learners admitted to a class exceeds official norms on class size, necessitating the combination of some learners from one grade with learners from another grade.
• Mobile schools in which one or more teachers move with nomadic and pastoralist learners spanning a wide range of ages and grades.

Conditions of multigrade education as a necessity have largely occurred in developing countries. Multigrade teaching is more prevalent in remote rural and farming areas, where there are low population settlements. Recently, in the wake of the need to increase access to education where universal primary education has not been achieved, multigrade education has been seen as having “the potential to improve quality of teaching, thus contributing to the global effort of achieving EFA (Education for All) goals” and education goals related to the Millennium Development Goals (Juvane 2005: 3-4).

The Ministerial Seminar on Education for Rural People in Africa, hosted by the government of Ethiopia in Addis Ababa in September 2005, deliberated on issues of multigrade education. It revealed that education ministries in Africa are increasingly viewing multigrade education as “a key pedagogic tool that can assist teachers to cope with teaching” in the contexts in which many countries find themselves – of teacher shortages, absenteeism resulting from the effects of HIV/AIDS, and budgetary constraints (Juvane 2005: 3-4). This latter view of multigrade education suggests that it is seen as a cost-saving mechanism.

There are cases where multigrade education has occurred by choice. In these cases a decision is made by policymakers and/or teachers to adopt a multigrade arrangement for pedagogic reasons. Multigrade education by choice has largely occurred in the developed world. An example of this is England, where multigrade education was deliberately adopted in order to implement child-centred approaches in which learners are encouraged to learn through social interaction with learners in different grades. Infant schools also recognise differential rates of cognitive development. Proponents of this rationale argue that multigrade education is a “powerful pedagogic tool for promoting independent and individualised learning” (Little 1995: 31). This thinking is largely based on possibilities for social development as well as peer and cross-age learning among children aged 5 to 7 years. Such multi-age arrangements are seen as mimicking the family situation in which there are children of varying ages (Little 1995). It is argued that there are sound pedagogical reasons for placing learners of different ages together in the same classroom, with the benefits being that children’s social development is stimulated and greater classroom cooperation is encouraged (Berry n.d.).

The conditions under which multigrade teaching is adopted are said to have an impact on the quality of education. Vithanapathirana (2006) cautions that in instances where multigrade teaching arises from necessity the quality of multigrade practices tends to be sub-standard.

Research undertaken in multigrade contexts has revealed that although multigrade education is not a superior approach to monograde education, it is a useful approach and can improve
educational quality in areas where there are difficulties (Berry n.d.). The social benefits to learners have been confirmed by the studies conducted on multigrade education. Little (1995: 39) writes that,

when programmes are correctly implemented, learners may attain higher achievement levels and improve social outcomes. But learners in multigrade schools which fail to adopt effective pedagogical techniques tend not to perform as well as their counterparts in single grade schools. The lesson to be drawn from this is that in order for a multigrade school to work well, teachers must master and use effective teaching practices, be supported through training programmes and have appropriate texts and materials at their disposal.

Our research explored whether the conditions referred to in the above quotation prevailed in South Africa and how multigrade education can be improved.

1.4 The historical context of education in South Africa

In this sub-section we discuss the historical context of education in South Africa, with a view to aiding our understanding of current conditions in rural education.

By the end of the apartheid era, in 1994, there was a profusion of school types created to meet the needs of apartheid’s racist ideologies. There were 14 departments of education – including 10 homeland government departments and a department for each race group.

In 1995 the Minister of Education constituted a committee that was tasked with reviewing the organisation, governance and funding of schools. Chaired by Professor Peter Hunter of the University of the Witwatersrand, its report (the ‘Hunter’ report), released in August 1995, laid the foundations for the South African Schools Act (SASA) (No. 84 of 1996). The report presents information on the status of the education system in 1994, describing, inter alia, school types, number of schools and enrolments.

Table 1.1 below illustrates that at that time the greatest proportion of the approximately 25 162 schools in South Africa were state schools and community schools. About 40% of the state schools were located in the former Transkei and the majority of these (probably over 90%) were former community schools whose designation had changed but whose conditions were similar to conditions in community schools in the other homelands.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Community</th>
<th>Farm/state-aided</th>
<th>Model C</th>
<th>Private</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enrolment</td>
<td>4 694 975</td>
<td>3 828 596</td>
<td>667 609</td>
<td>866 900</td>
<td>123 864</td>
<td>10 201 448</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools</td>
<td>8 278</td>
<td>7 669</td>
<td>1 884</td>
<td>1 860</td>
<td>457</td>
<td>25 162</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: These figures have their limitations as all the figures are not for the same year and thus not directly comparable. Further, the totals and the figures provided do not entirely reconcile. As the report (DoE 1995) states, however, these data provide an overview of the pattern of school ownership inherited by the government.
Communities built and maintained their schools but many did not receive a subsidy for their efforts. They bore the costs of building, maintenance and all resources as the government paid only for teachers’ salaries, textbooks and stationery. As a result most schools were in a wretched state given the prevailing poverty in the communities. There are no data on multigrade classes at that juncture but it is likely that the shortage of funds translated into a shortage of classrooms and hence multigrade classes (DoE 1995).

At the end of the apartheid era schools on farms were the most poorly provided for school type as they were bound in complex and often contentious ways with agricultural production. The Bantu Education Act (No. 47 of 1953) defined the status of public schools on private land. Partly subsidised by government and located on commercial farms, they were classified as ‘state-aided’ schools because property-owners subsidised schooling through the provision of buildings and some facilities and services, even though the Bantu Education Department (later renamed the Department of Education and Training) was directly responsible for these schools. However, farmers controlled many aspects of school management and governance. As property-owners they had the final say in the selection of teachers as well as having the power to open and close schools, and to decide on the enrolment numbers, which learners should be allowed to attend the school and what grade levels the school could offer. In fact, it was only after 1980 that schools on farms were given permission to offer education beyond Grade 4, which many did by extending grade levels without being given additional classrooms or teachers, leading to the creation of additional multigrade classes at the schools.

By 1994, the provision of education to farms was somewhat uneven with some schools having excellent facilities, provided by farmers and other property-owners such as churches and private companies, and others – and unfortunately these were in the majority – remaining poorly subsidised by the state and badly serviced by property-owners and the state. At that time they were among the poorest in the country in physical infrastructure, the provision of facilities and services, and teaching resources. Retention rates were significantly lower at farm schools than at all other schools (Gordon 2000). By 1994, half of the African children living on white-owned commercial farms were not enrolled at school and few schools offered secondary-level education (Gordon 1991).

1.5 Structure of the report

The remainder of the report consists of five sections.

Section 2 outlines the research methods used in the study. Quantitative methods were used to provide the national picture about the size and shape of multigrade education in South Africa, and qualitative methods were used to study multigrade education in depth. Data were collected at six case study schools in the North West Province during 2009 and 2010. These schools were located in rural areas. The conceptual framework for the study is also outlined in Section 2.

In Section 3, the data dealing with the quantitative study are analysed with reference to schools, teachers, learners, classrooms and academic performance.

Section 4 analyses qualitative data, starting with a brief policy review relating to multigrade education. The larger part of this section looks into the case study data on the context and practices of multigrade curricula, teaching strategies, learning materials, language, assessment, teacher development and support, and teacher attitudes towards their work.
The findings of the report are synthesised in Section 5. This section brings together the analyses and conclusions from the quantitative and qualitative studies.

Section 6 concludes the report with policy recommendations based on the findings. The recommendations have been guided by the key assumptions outlined in the Introduction and the research questions listed in the section on methodology.
2. **Methodology**

This section outlines research aims and questions, discusses the methodological approach adopted and provides justifications for the choices made. Also included in the discussion is the research process followed.

### 2.1 Research questions

Key questions framing the research study are as follows:

- What is the extent of the multigrade phenomenon in the South African education system?
- What are the literacy and numeracy teaching practices of teachers in multigrade classes?
- How effective are these teaching practices in facilitating the acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills among learners?
- What are the challenges and opportunities presented by multigrade situations in ensuring that multigrade teaching benefits learners?
- How do Initial Professional Education for Teachers (IPET) and Continuing Professional Teacher Development (CPTD) programmes capacitate teachers to deal with multigrade classes?

### 2.2 Mixed methods research

Following the framing of the research questions, a mixed methods research model was adopted. As the term implies, mixed methods research involves a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods in a single research project. The research is able to capitalise on the strengths of the two research approaches while offsetting the weaknesses thereof (Bazeley 2002; Creswell & Plano Clark 2007; Brannen 2005).

The quantitative approach allows for the study of the breadth of a phenomenon, as well as allowing for useful generalisations (Patton 1990; Bazeley 2002). For this reason, it was adopted to help the study analyse the extent of the multigrade education phenomenon in our education system. On the other hand, the qualitative approach makes it possible for a phenomenon to be studied in depth (Patton 1990; Bazeley 2002). Thus, it was seen as appropriate for the study of the remainder of the questions, which related to teaching practices, opportunities and challenges, and issues relating to teacher education and development.

Consequently, the mixed methods model also allowed for the multigrade education phenomenon to be studied at multiple levels – that is, at national, provincial and school levels.
2.2.1 Quantitative research

The quantitative research took the form of a desktop analysis of secondary data collected by the Education Management Information Systems (EMIS) Directorate of the Department of Basic Education (DBE), to determine the extent of the multigrade education in South Africa. The analysis looked at the number of multigrade schools in the country and the number of learners and teachers in multigrade settings. It also considered learner achievement at multigrade as compared to monograde schools.

2.2.1.1 Process of producing quantitative analysis

Four steps were followed in producing the quantitative analyses, namely: accessing data; data cleaning; imputation of missing data; and comparative analysis between public schools and multigrade schools (which is a subset of public schools).

Accessing data

The EMIS heads of the nine Provincial Education Departments (PEDs) were contacted telephonically and asked to provide data on multigrade schools in their respective provinces using the 2010 annual survey. Thereafter, an email was sent to all provinces elaborating on the request by indicating the fields required, namely: national EMIS school number; province; name of school; registration status (public or independent, plus date of registration); number of learners by grade; age and grade of learners by gender; number of multigrade classes; number of teachers in multigrade classes; combination of grades in multigrade classes; number of learners by grade in multigrade classes; and Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT) in multigrade teaching.

Five provinces responded, providing some of the fields: namely, Eastern Cape, Free State, Gauteng, North West and Northern Cape. Reminders were sent to the remaining four provinces that had not responded. These data were not officially released, thus potentially compromising the status of the report. The national DBE was then contacted, in an attempt to obtain the 2010 data. Data were provided on the understanding that the data would be cleaned by the recipient and authorised by the DBE.

Data cleaning

Three masters-level student statisticians were engaged to clean the data of two of the provinces and to run correlations with the 2007, 2008 and 2009 datasets that had been cleaned previously. The data of the remaining three provinces were also cleaned. Lists of discrepancies in excess of 2% were prepared for all nine provinces and referred to provincial EMIS units for validation against primary records. Errors were rectified in 81% of the cases. Abnormal growth in 19% of the schools was due to the amalgamation of farm schools, immigration of learners from neighbouring countries who had settled in squatter camps, and late enrolment of learners. Schools with Nil (0) number of learners were removed from the list of schools. Teacher numbers were adjusted in line with Personnel and Salary (PERSAL) data and the distribution of teachers using the “Morkel Model”.

Imputation of missing data

There were still a number of blank cells in the database that required information. A software programme called “The Potter’s Wheel” was used to impute data into these cells. The programme used vertical, horizontal and oblique data to calculate the value of the missing cells concentrically, to narrow down the moving average. The programme uses known values to stabilise the quotients obtained. Lowest grade/highest grade values were used to define parameters. The cleaned, imputed datasets were merged into a single database on an Oracle platform. Various
statistical tools were then used to analyse the data. The graphic and table presentations found in the current report were then produced.

**Comparative analysis between public schools and multigrade schools**

The multigrade schools database is a subset of the public schools database. The comparative findings are listed below:

- There is a 0.4% positive gini co-efficient difference in the multigrade database, showing that there are more girls in multigrade classes than boys as compared to the public schools database for Grades 1 to 7.
- The grade decline in the number of learners’ progression from Grade 1 to 12 is much greater than in the public schools database. There appears to be a movement of learners from multigrade schools to public (monograde) schools for Grades 10 to 12. As the unit of measurement is the number of learners and not unique learners, there is no evidence on which this claim can be based. Qualitative tracking investigations could be carried out at a sample of multigrade schools to verify this finding.
- A cohort analysis using at least five years’ data is required in order to compare the performance, dropout and retention rates at multigrade and public (monograde) schools. This work has not been carried out.

### 2.2.2 Qualitative research

The qualitative aspect of the study involved, firstly, a review of literature on the issue of multigrade education with a view to understanding the phenomenon as well as establishing the conceptual framework for undertaking the study. Secondly, it involved conducting case studies in six multigrade schools. The case studies were augmented by interviews undertaken with the relevant district and provincial officials in the North West Province as well as interviews with a selection of teacher training institutions.

#### 2.2.2.1 Literature reviews

The qualitative study commenced with two literature reviews. The first literature review assessed the viability of multigrade education as a policy option for South Africa through considering international experiences in industrialised and poor countries.

The second literature review focused on teacher education and development practices in relation to multigrade education internationally and in South Africa with a view to drawing out implications for teacher education and training in South Africa.

These two review papers, which constitute separate, independent texts, informed the conceptual framework for this study. They can be accessed at www.3Rs.org.za.

#### 2.2.2.2 Policy review

The study also undertook a brief review of South African policies in relation to the issues being considered by the study, with the intention of examining how such policies support multigrade teaching. This review focuses on the policy context for multigrade teaching, and covers a selection of policies, namely, those relating to teacher education and development, curriculum, and learner assessment.
2.2.2.3 Case studies
Six primary schools with multigrade classes in the Ruth Mompati District of the Bophirima region in the North West Province were selected, in consultation with the provincial and regional education officials. Three were farm schools located in the Ganyesa area, while the other three rural schools were located in the Greater Taung area. Case studies were chosen to enable the study to investigate multigrade education “within its real life context” (Yin 2003: 13).

According to Merriam (1988: 21), qualitative case studies “are particularistic, descriptive and heuristic, and rely heavily on inductive reasoning in handling multiple data sources”. It was hoped that case studies would provide the overall study with thick descriptions of multigrade teaching practices in context.

Researchers from the Education Policy Consortium (EPC) visited the schools in October 2008 to introduce the project and the research process. In addition, the first visit aimed to get permission from the schools to conduct the research. All of the schools were keen to become part of the study and were eager to share their experiences.

The actual fieldwork took place in the period 9–20 March 2009. Each school was visited by a team of two researchers from the EPC. Four methods, as outlined below, were adopted for collecting data.

a) School-administered profile instrument
The first method was the use of a school profile instrument. Administered by the schools themselves, the instrument aimed to collect data on the context and background of the school; staff and learner profiles; services and facilities; and learner performance records. This instrument was handed to the principal on the first day of the fieldwork and collected later in the week.

b) Document analysis
The second method used for data collection was an analysis of existing documents that were believed to shed light on teaching practices. The documents included timetables, year plans, term plans and lesson plans. In addition, learners’ Literacy and Numeracy workbooks were studied.

c) Lesson observations
The third method of data collection was lesson observation. Researchers took detailed notes of the lesson observations, guided by an instrument developed for this purpose and which had been piloted and adapted in October 2008. Table 2.1 below shows the grades and lessons observed at each of the schools.
Table 2.1: Grades and learning programmes observed at each of the schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Grades</th>
<th>Learning areas, and number of lessons observed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emang</td>
<td>Grades 2 and 3</td>
<td>2 Numeracy; 1 Setswana Literacy; 1 English Literacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keitumetse</td>
<td>Grades 4, 5 and 6</td>
<td>1 Numeracy; 1 English Literacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Grades R–3</td>
<td>1 Numeracy/Literacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lokang</td>
<td>Grades 5 and 6</td>
<td>2 English Literacy; 1 Mathematics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathapelo</td>
<td>Grades 1–3</td>
<td>2 Numeracy; 1 Setswana Literacy; 1 English Literacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moeti</td>
<td>Grades 2 and 3</td>
<td>2 Literacy; 2 Numeracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pietersburg</td>
<td>Grades 6 and 7</td>
<td>1 Numeracy: Mathematics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Grades 4 and 5</td>
<td>1 Afrikaans Literacy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

d) Interviews
The fourth data collection method was interviews conducted with the principal and the teacher responsible for the multigrade class at each of the schools. The instruments used had been piloted during and adjusted following the 2008 visits. These interviews focused on various aspects of teaching and learning, including curriculum adaptation and planning; teaching strategies; assessment; language; teaching and learning materials; and teacher education, development and support. Multigrade teachers were interviewed prior to lesson observation and after all the lessons had been observed. The idea behind interviewing the teacher after observations was to gain insights into the thinking underpinning the strategies used and actions taken by teachers observed during the lesson.

In addition to school-based stakeholders, relevant provincial and district officials were interviewed, especially with regard to support strategies relating to multigrade teaching.

Further, four teacher education institutions – one each in KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo, North West Province and the Western Cape – were interviewed to find out how they were preparing multigrade teachers. This was done to augment the data from schools, as well as the data from the research, forming part of the teacher education and development practices literature.

In March 2010, preliminary findings of the report were presented at a seminar involving representatives of the participating schools, as well as provincial and district officials. The Rural Education Directorate of the DBE was also represented at that seminar.

2.3 Conceptual framework

Our reading of the literature (both international and local) and our understanding of the educational context, particularly in South Africa, have led us to conclude that there are a number of macro-level (national), meso-level (provincial and district), and local-level (school and classroom) factors that are fundamental to the support of multigrade teaching. It is these factors that have framed the work undertaken in this study, and it is from these factors that analytical categories have been deduced. These are elements that we believe are essential to the formulation of a comprehensive multigrade teaching strategy.
Diagram 2.1 below presents the elements of this conceptual framework. This framework attempts to provide a holistic multigrade strategy and not piecemeal adaptations to current teaching and learning situations in the diverse array of multigrade schools across South Africa.

Diagram 2.1: Elements of the conceptual framework

At national level, there is a need for a national policy on multigrade education, including other educational policies that impact on multigrade schools; for example, teacher education and development, curriculum adaptations, and resourcing. This is in line with the responsibility of setting national norms as stipulated in the National Education Policy Act (No. 27 of 1996). National policies set the broader context and conditions within which multigrade schools function. A selection of these policies is briefly reviewed as part of this study.

At provincial level, national policy should be translated into provincial guidelines and adaptations to provincial peculiarities and implementation processes and outcomes. This level includes district-level support.

Lastly, and very importantly, the school and community levels are the context within which teachers teach and learners learn. As part of the context of schools, issues of resources – both physical (including infrastructure, and teaching and learning resources) and human – were
considered. Even in well-resourced contexts, without effective teacher practices it may not be possible to ensure successful multigrade teaching. Particular focus areas for this study are:

- Curriculum adaptation;
- Lesson planning;
- Teaching practices (learner organisational strategies and teaching strategies);
- LoLT;
- Learning and teaching support materials; and
- Assessment practices.

Cutting across all three levels is the issue of attitudes towards multigrade teaching; how stakeholders involved in multigrade teaching view it is crucial to its success.

All in all, multigrade education requires involvement of all of the levels for it to work. Therefore, it needs to be embraced by all relevant levels of the system and to be supported purposely and appropriately if it is to succeed and if learners in multigrade settings are to be afforded equal opportunities to education.

2.4 Data analysis and report writing

Data from the quantitative and qualitative approaches were analysed separately, in keeping with the parallel design of the mixed method research model adopted in this study. The steps followed in analysing the quantitative data were detailed earlier. The findings of the quantitative research are reported in Section 3.

Qualitative case study data were captured and organised using a Microsoft Word table, which allowed for the coding in terms of sources of data and themes informed both by the conceptual framework and those emerging from the field. This table enabled the filtering of data using codes. On this basis, within-case analysis of data was undertaken, to help with understanding each of the six case studies in their own right and “learn as much about the contextual variables as possible that might have a bearing on the case” (Merriam 1998: 194). Case study reports for each of the schools were produced using a pre-defined structure in relation to the themes studied. These case study reports formed the basis of a cross-case analysis, which sought to understand the findings across cases and to come up with general explanations that would fit individual cases (Yin 1994, cited in Merriam 1998), but taking into account nuances among the cases.

A problem related to varying levels of detail adopted by the different researchers in their case study reports arose. The problem was partly resolved by studying the data tables onto which the data had been captured. It could also have been resolved by following up with the schools; however, there had been a time lapse between the time when the data were collected and the time when the synthesis was done, so pursuing such an option would have distorted the findings. Despite this, there were sufficient data to understand multigrade education in the participating schools. On the basis of the cross-case analysis of data, a report of the findings of the qualitative aspect of the study was produced, as presented in Section 4 of this report.

It is worth noting that the process described here has not been a linear process, but an iterative one – starting with the first day of data collection at each school through to the writing of this report – as is the case with qualitative research.
3. Shape and size of multigrade education

3.1 The national picture

Table 3.1 and Figure 3.1 below provide an overall picture of the situation in South Africa. They compare multigrade schools to public schools by showing the numbers of schools, teachers and learners.

Table 3.1: Schools, teachers and learners at public schools and at public multigrade schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Province</th>
<th>All Schools</th>
<th>MG Schools</th>
<th>% in Province</th>
<th>All Educators</th>
<th>MG Educators</th>
<th>% in Province</th>
<th>All Learners</th>
<th>MG Learners</th>
<th>% in Province</th>
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</thead>
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<td>12734</td>
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<td>1573</td>
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<td>761</td>
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<td>54586</td>
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<td>27403</td>
<td>7.07</td>
<td>11834516</td>
<td>47044</td>
<td>0.40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: PED EMIS database (2010)

Figure 3.1: Multigrade schools as a percentage of public schools

Source: National EMIS database (2010)
Multigrade teaching takes place in about 27% of all the schools in the country. The largest number of multigrade schools is located in Limpopo, the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal. These provinces are rural, with extreme pockets of poverty, and agricultural activity representing a significant proportion of income. The number of multigrade schools in the Free State and Mpumalanga has decreased over the past five years, possibly due to the amalgamation and closure of small schools and the relocation of farming communities to urban areas. Under the apartheid government, farmers built schools and claimed a subsidy from the government. It was in the interests of farmers to have a school on the farm; it kept the children busy while their parents were working in the fields, created a future labour force, and restricted the possibilities for children outside of the farm. In this way the old system supported small, multigrade schools in rural areas. The SASA (No. 84 of 1996) forced contractual agreements to be put in place for the use of farm schools constructed by the farm-owner. Few of these contracts have been concluded and many farm schools have been closed or relocated. Under the apartheid government, farmers built schools and claimed a subsidy from government for the buildings. The buildings became the property of the farmer after nine years and eleven months. The present government intends to regularise and implement new agreements to be concluded between the state and farm-owners (DoE 2009).

The common assumption that multigrade teaching takes place only in rural areas is not correct. There are significant numbers of multigrade schools in highly urbanised provinces – for example, in Gauteng, where 38% of the schools are multigrade, compared to the national average of 27%. The high average of multigrade schools could be explained by the fact that Gauteng has a fairly substantial agricultural base and small farming in peri-urban areas. It is likely that these schools are in these areas as well as in informal settlements.

The explanations for the existence of multigrade schools differ for urban and rural areas. In urban areas the curriculum and subject choices encourage multigrade teaching. Small numbers of learners do elective subjects, which results in very small classes. Schools therefore combine several grades into a single class and employ additional teachers to teach these subjects and classes. Giving learners a wide choice is not, from the point of view of the education departments, the best way to distribute and utilise teacher resources.

In urban areas large schools that offer primarily monograde teaching can have small numbers of multigrade classes because of curricular subject requirements and combinations of subjects. The number of schools that have multigrade classes can represent schools with more than one grade of learners in one classroom, where a teacher teaches all of them simultaneously or in groups. It can also represent a large school with over 1,500 learners where, because of subject, gender or other requirements, learners from different grades are placed in one class; or it may apply to a situation where fewer learners enrol for a subject. A hypothetical example could be that learners who enrol for add-maths – for example, seven learners from Grade 10; five learners from Grade 11 and three learners from Grade 12 – are combined for six periods a week in one class and taught by an experienced maths teacher. This situation would also apply to scarce languages, such as Tshivenda and Xitsonga, that are spoken by a large number of people in the Limpopo Province, but by a very small number of people in Gauteng and the Western Cape. Schools in these provinces combine learners in the Foundation Phase by language to teach them in the mother tongue and also in the Further Education and Training Phase for those that offer a third language. In South Africa learners offer the mother tongue as a first language and the LoLT as a second language. The same situation would apply to subjects like Technical Drawing, Art, and subjects at technical schools. Another typical case is that of Physical Education, Woodwork, Metalwork and Domestic Science where, depending on the subject, small numbers of girls from
Grades 8 and 9 are combined in the same class, and small numbers of boys are taught in the same class.

Technically these are all multigrade classes, but not in line with the conventional definition of a multigrade school. One policy implication would be to look at the workload and remuneration based on expectations of teachers that teach three separate groups of learners and assess them at these levels. The learner numbers in these cases are small in comparison to monograde classes.

While more than a quarter of the schools in South Africa are multigrade, these schools cater for only 0.4% (or 47 044) of the country’s learners. The policy question that the PEDs need to address is the viability of small schools, and big schools with small classes, in rural and urban areas. The allocation and provision of teaching posts mean that teachers can teach several grades in very small classes.

Policy options around the merging and/or closing of rural and farm schools have been finalised and are currently being implemented. This is not only a quantitative question related to the cost effectiveness of these schools and the implications that can be drawn from studying the data we have presented above. It is also related to factors such as the curriculum and subject choices, the accessibility of schools and the distances learners have to travel, poor infrastructures of many of these schools, the retention of teachers and the sometimes declining numbers of learners. It is important that these issues be weighed up against the overall goal of improving access to quality education, especially in rural areas. Merging or closing schools should impact positively on surrounding communities and enhance rural development and be sensitive to the social and cultural conditions of the local communities. The processes by which such decisions are made are therefore critical: all of the relevant stakeholders (school communities of parents, teachers and learners), school governing bodies, local non-governmental organisations, teacher unions and the broader communities should be consulted (see DoE 2009).

It is, therefore, not a technical or accounting matter, or simply the idea that concentrating the children in fewer schools will somehow produce better quality education. The assumptions that underlie the education department’s approach to merging these schools have to be made more explicit so that qualitative questions can be asked. It may be that the department is missing a crucial opportunity to deal with the problems of quality through the possibilities offered by the multigrade system. Multigrade education could well provide some insights into what the best interventions for the overall system are – it could be used as a microcosm of the system, in which innovative initiatives might be tried.

### 3.2 Teachers and multigrade schools

The complexities of quality education in multigrade schools are further exemplified by reference to the position of teachers. The analyses of Table 3.1 and Figure 3.1 above, as well as a closer look at the numbers of teachers, also raise the question of the viability of multigrade schools.

Figure 3.2 below highlights the difficulty of maintaining adequate numbers of staff members at multigrade schools, and the sporadic nature of learner numbers at these schools. Teachers at these schools become despondent, for not only do they have to teach but it is not uncommon that they also serve as the school clerk or secretary and principal. We have anecdotal evidence of at least one teacher at one of the schools with an excess of 400 learners who expressed the view that his continued posting at the school appears to be a punitive measure as he has applied
unsuccessfully on a number of occasions for a transfer. He is a member of the local community and attended the school as a learner and has served the community loyally for 14 years. He has few promotion prospects.

Collingwood (1991) discusses a variety of issues that multigrade teachers in small schools have to cope with. These include inadequate training, and lack of teaching and learning resources (see also Little 2005). Poisson (2002) suggests increasing the remuneration of teachers working in isolated, multigrade schools in order to recruit teachers to work in these schools and to retain those already working there.

Figure 3.2 shows the number of multigrade schools with one teacher.

**Figure 3.2: Number of multigrade schools (by learner interval) with one teacher**

![Bar chart showing the number of multigrade schools with one teacher, by learner interval.](source: National EMIS database (2010))

Studying Figure 3.2, we can see that, for example, there are 19 multigrade schools with one teacher that have between 100 and 150 learners, and 73 schools with one teacher that have between 151 and 200 learners. Overall, these schools have large numbers of learners but are understaffed – because in each case they have only one teacher. The trend in Figure 3.2 ranges from 74 schools with between 201 and 250 learners to six schools with between 401 and 450 learners. The likely and ostensible reason why multigrade schools are understaffed is that it is difficult to retain multigrade teachers for reasons such as their location in isolated areas. It should be remembered that these data were collected during the first term in 2010. If a school was entitled to additional teachers, such teachers would probably take two to three months to be appointed and to arrive at the school. In the meantime, one teacher would be ‘looking after’ big multigrade classes. It is unlikely that effective teaching and learning would take place during this time.
Figure 3.3: The pattern of teacher distribution at multigrade schools (2010)

Source: National EMIS database (2010)

Figure 3.3 shows the number of multigrade schools correlated with the number of multigrade teachers. Figure 3.3 also shows the actual numbers of teachers at schools that have between one and 20 teachers, correlated with the actual numbers of schools, in 2010. There were, for example, 10 teachers at 233 schools teaching multigrade classes and 20 teachers at 37 schools. As the number of teachers increases, the number of schools having these increased numbers decreases, so in general there are more teachers at fewer schools. This once more highlights the fact that these schools are understaffed.

Government policy allocates one teacher to about 40 learners, assuming that schools have learner numbers in multiples of 40. This is, of course, not always the case. This policy encourages schools to combine classes, increasing the number of multigrade classes in order to qualify for extra teachers and/or retain the existing staff establishments. Further, two policies curtail teacher numbers in order to cut the costs of the teacher salary bill. These policies favour rich schools and discriminate against small, multigrade schools in rural areas. Firstly, according to the “Morkel Model”, the budget allocated to teacher salaries is divided by the average teacher salary to provide the number of teachers a province can afford. The total number of teachers is then distributed to all the learners in the province; that is, total learners divided by total teachers. A weighting mechanism allocates more teachers to secondary schools than to primary schools. Secondly, school governing bodies can employ additional teachers by allowing learners to pay additional fees. This favours affluent schools that serve affluent communities. Multigrade schools often serve fewer, illiterate parents in poorer communities who do not always raise their voices to agitate for greater equality in education. These schools and communities end up with the poorest qualified, itinerant teachers.

3.3 Classrooms, teachers and learners

Figure 3.4 below provides a national picture of the number of multigrade classroom schools for all provinces from 2004–07. The graph shows the number of multigrade schools where there is only one classroom, and the number of multigrade schools where the number of grades is more
than the number of classrooms for two, three and four classrooms. For example, in 2004 there were 1 476 multigrade schools with one classroom and in 2007 there were 1 623. The figures for two-, three- and four-classroom schools are 2 786, 1 578 and 441 in 2004 and 2 822, 1 664 and 494 in 2007 respectively. The graph also shows that in the case of one-classroom schools there was one teacher. In the case of two-, three- and four-classroom schools, the number of teachers will be two, three and four respectively, because there was one teacher per classroom. The analysis in Figure 3.4 was done by province and then aggregated. Provincial EMIS units verified the accuracy of the databases.

**Figure 3.4: Multigrade schools by number of classrooms – all provinces (2004–07)**

![Figure 3.4: Multigrade schools by number of classrooms – all provinces (2004–07)](image)

The graph shows the trend over a four-year period: there was marginal growth in the number of multigrade classrooms by category of one, two, three and four classrooms in the period 2004–07. The graph also highlights the close correlation between the number of classrooms and the number of teachers.

The policy implications are that district and provincial offices of the Department of Education (DoE) need to monitor this situation carefully. While the overall, national picture is one of a small increase in the numbers of these schools, there could very well be local variations. If the number of learners increases, more classrooms, teachers and resources will be required.

Closing very small multigrade schools or merging them with other schools does not mean that the multigrade phenomenon can be eliminated. As in almost all other countries, multigrade education is here to stay. The policy question is how these schools should best be supported. Basic quantitative data about the numbers of teachers, learners, schools and classrooms are important tools in the hands of provincial education planning officials. They can, for example, be used to cost the supply of special learning materials for multigrade schools. Teachers, especially in isolated rural areas, can be supported through breaking their isolation. This can be achieved through costing the implementation of in-service training programmes and the use of technology. While the extract below, taken from a publication by the DBE, speaks about the role...
that Information and Communications Technology (ICT) can play in rural schools, it does not spell out the human and financial resources, such as the provision of computers and internet access, required to implement it. Nor indeed does it set out a plan for developing these capabilities:

The hardships of long distance travel and communication with district officials can be addressed by using email, teleconferencing and...Skype technology. Documents to and from schools can be delivered by email. Teachers can also use email to communicate with colleagues and break the professional isolation suffered by teachers in remote areas. Networking such as Facebook and subsequent teamwork could become a key driver in reducing the workloads of teachers in rural areas. Subject area meetings could also be conducted by subject advisors sending handouts by email and conducting cluster meetings via teleconferencing. Face-to-face meetings between principals and circuit managers could be conducted using, for example Skype. (DBE 2011c: 8)

3.4 Academic performance

Table 3.2 below shows the promotion rate of learners for each province from Grades R to 12, as well as the national averages for the DBE, in 2010. Thus, in the Eastern Cape 90% of the learners were promoted in Grade R, the average promotion rate for the province across all the grades was 85.79%, and nationally 93.81% of the learners in Grade R were promoted. The province with the highest promotion rate averaged over all grades for 2010 is Gauteng. This is also the province with the highest pass rate for the Senior Certificate examination. Second to Gauteng is KwaZulu-Natal, with Limpopo having the lowest pass rate for multigrade schools.

Table 3.2: Multigrade promotion rate – by province and for the DBE (2010)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Province</th>
<th>Gr R</th>
<th>Gr 1</th>
<th>Gr 2</th>
<th>Gr 3</th>
<th>Gr 4</th>
<th>Gr 5</th>
<th>Gr 6</th>
<th>Gr 7</th>
<th>Gr 8</th>
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<th>Gr 12</th>
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<td>89.9</td>
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<td>91.41</td>
<td>85.73</td>
<td>75.33</td>
<td>75.66</td>
<td>67.74</td>
<td>86.41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: National EMIS database (2010)

Similarly Table 3.3 below shows the data for monograde schools. The province with the highest pass rate for monograde schools is Gauteng, followed by the Western Cape and KwaZulu-Natal. Limpopo has the lowest pass rate.
Table 3.3: Monograde promotion rate – by Province and for the DBE (2010)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Gr 1</th>
<th>Gr 2</th>
<th>Gr 3</th>
<th>Gr 4</th>
<th>Gr 5</th>
<th>Gr 6</th>
<th>Gr 7</th>
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<td>89.4</td>
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<td>87.5</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>90.8</td>
<td>92.1</td>
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<td>83.2</td>
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</tr>
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<td>94.4</td>
<td>95.2</td>
<td>96.2</td>
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<td>94.8</td>
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<td>85.46</td>
<td>74.44</td>
<td>75.95</td>
<td>68.65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: National EMIS database (2010)

Table 3.4 compares the promotion rates of multigrade and monograde schools.

Table 3.4: Comparison, as a percentage – Promotion rate where multigrade>monograde and monograde>multigrade (2010)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
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<td>4</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: National EMIS database (2010)

Table 3.4 above indicates the grade and province where the performance of multigrade learners exceeds that of monograde learners. This is indicated by the number 1 in the table above. For example, in the Eastern Cape, six grades at multigrade schools (viz. Grades 6, 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12) attained better pass rates when compared to monograde schools. The overall picture is that there are 39 such cases out of a possible 156, or exactly 33.3% of the grades, where learners in multigrade classes attained better pass rates. Monograde schools, in 66.7% of the grades, perform much better than multigrade schools – shown by the blank spaces in the table.

Is multigrade education inferior to or better than monograde education? Are learners in multigrade classrooms disadvantaged in terms of academic performance outcomes? A great deal of further research is required on the situation in South Africa in order to answer these and related questions. In reviewing several international studies, Brown (2008: 27) writes:
A large proportion of the studies on student achievement in multigrade teaching have sought primarily to systematise and evaluate the research on (a) the effects of multigrade classes on student achievement, as well as (b) the processes that contribute to these effects.

Brown states that the evidence on the comparisons between multigrade and monograde is often “inconclusive”, and that “being a student in a multigrade class does not negatively affect academic performance” (2008: 27).

A host of variables that influence academic performance have been discussed in the literature, including grouping, school size, learner ability, socio-economic status and others. Location in rural or urban areas and in rich and poor countries is obviously crucial. The international literature is instructive in drawing attention to the effects of multigrade teaching on non-cognitive outcomes such as friendships among learners, the social and psychological development of learners and their attitudes towards school and education. We know very little about the non-cognitive performance of multigrade teaching and the impact of the different variables in South Africa.

The statistics on South Africa, reviewed above in Tables 3.2, 3.3 and 3.4, should be treated with caution because they generally show high pass and promotion rates. The recent data collected by the DBE and widely reported in the media highlight the poor literacy and numeracy levels of South African learners. The question raised is the reliability of the data in the above tables, especially the very high pass and promotion rates, in reflecting accurately the academic ability and performance of the learners.

### 3.5 Conclusion

It is worth re-stating that in South Africa, and all countries in the world discussed in the literature, multigrade education will persist long into the future, despite the fact that government, schools and school communities may agree that certain schools in certain districts may have to close or merge. The question then is how multigrade education can be supported.

We have shown how basic quantitative data analyses about multigrade education can be used by policymakers. We have also indicated areas, such as the academic performance of multigrade schools, where we think more work needs to be done. Gathering and analysing the annual statistics collected by the PEDs and national government, with a specific focus on multigrade education, is not an insurmountable task. Such data can be used to further the goals of supporting education in some of the poorest and most isolated areas in the country.
4. Policies, context and practices relating to multigrade education

We now turn to analysing the six case studies in the North West Province using the analytical categories in the conceptual framework. In particular, this section examines the policy context of multigrade teaching, the context of multigrade schools and teaching practices within them.

4.1 Policy context of multigrade education

No policy has been developed to address the issue of multigrade education within the South African education system. Confronted with a racially and ethnically fragmented and unequal education system, the preoccupation of the democratically elected government of 1994 was to create a single, unified education system. In keeping with this, legislation passed after the advent of democracy prioritised a unified and equitable education system. The struggle to provide quality education to rural communities, from that time to the present, has been to provide equitable resources – of infrastructure, of services, of learning materials – and to ensure a supply of adequately trained teachers. Recent EMIS data provided by the DBE show that this process is far from complete; a large number of learners in rural areas still attend schools without sanitation, are placed in overcrowded classes, and have access to too few resources in classes.

Key legislation in the creation of a single education system was the SASA (No. 84 of 1996), which, like White Paper 2 before it, was based on the ‘Hunter’ report. The SASA proposed two broad categories of schools: public schools and independent schools. The public schools category was to consist of all schools formerly known as community schools, farm schools, state schools and state-aided schools (including church schools, Model C schools, mine schools and others).

In the case of community schools, responsibility for education was transferred to the provinces, as was the case for all schools other than state-aided schools. However, the transfer of responsibility from farmers and other property-owners was complex, as schools were located on private land. Legislation for the transfer of assets or the transfer of management of schools from the property-owners to the state was tackled in the (infamous) Section 14 (1)(7) of the SASA. This endorsed the state’s responsibility for schools on private land, stating that a public school should be allowed to operate on private land only in terms of an agreement between the MEC and the property-owner. This agreement provided for the provision of education and the performance of the normal functions of a public school (with respect to governance, access, security of occupation, maintenance and capital improvements) together with the protection of the landowner’s rights. The Act further stated that the agreement would be enforced against successive owners if farms were sold.
Other options provided for in the SASA were:

- The closure of schools;
- The registration of educational rights on a piece of land, which could be endorsed on the title deed of the property; and
- The expropriation of land or a real right in or over land for any purpose relating to school education in a province.

Few farmers signed agreements despite a call to the farmers at a conference organised by then Education Minister Kader Asmal in 2000 to which all agricultural unions were invited (DoE 2000).

The particularity of teaching and learning conditions in schools in rural areas was sidelined by policymakers until fairly recently. It was not until 2004 – when Minister Asmal appointed a Ministerial Committee on Rural Education (MCTE) – that education in rural schools became a focus. The committee was tasked with producing a report containing practical recommendations to help the DoE and the PEDs develop an integrated, multifaceted plan of action for improving the quality of schooling in rural areas.

The report, delivered in 2005 (Ministry of Education 2005), argues that South Africa’s first 10 years of democracy were marked by an overwhelming commitment to equality and to treating everyone in the same way no matter what their differences. Hence, rural schools were managed and funded on the same principles and formulas as urban schools. So too, curriculum and pedagogies of rural schooling were planned to be the same as those found in urban settings. Many submissions to the committee proposed a contrasting view; that state provision of rural schooling should be resourced and organised differently from urban schools if the country were to meet the needs of rural learners without constraining their potential to seek further education and employment opportunities on a par with their urban counterparts.

Further, submissions drew the committee’s attention to the difficulties facing teachers having to deal with multigrade classes, which meant that teachers in rural areas required appropriate forms of support and professional development as well as amendments to post provisioning for small schools. To quote two submissions:

One of the most challenging [elements] is that of the multigrade classes. Many farm schools are one- or two-educator schools having multigrade classes. As a result one educator sometimes has to teach more than two grades, some teach as many as six grades. This indicates that current post provisioning formulas need to be amended to take account of the needs of these small, multigrade schools. Capacity development is also required: school managers must be made aware of the management skills needed to administer small schools and educators given skills to cope with multigrade classes. (Ministry of Education 2005: 53)

While aspects of professional development could be generic, there needs to be sensitivity to specific features that characterise small rural schools. Multigrade teaching is a fact of life in such schools. “This requires special skills and educators need to receive training on how to deal effectively with large ‘multigrade’ classes.” (Ministry of Education 2005: 46)

These quotations point to the importance of specialised management skills for managers of small schools, an issue that has been largely ignored in current efforts to address the needs of teachers in small schools.
The chief outcome of this report was the creation of a Rural Education Directorate, which worked with its counterparts in the provinces. The directorate created a framework for closing and merging schools (*Guidelines for the Rationalisation of Small or Non-viable Schools* DoE 2009). In line with the framework for closing and merging schools, the North West Province developed a provincial response, namely, *Farm and Rural School Strategy* (North West Department of Education 2007). Some schools had been merged at the time of the interviews with provinces.

It is evident from the response to multigrade teaching outlined above that the approach taken by the education department is that of attempting to eliminate multigrade teaching rather than developing and supporting it. This is an issue of concern, given that it is highly unlikely that multigrade education will be eliminated in the short run, and that there are teachers and learners who require specific support given their multigrade teaching reality.

Despite the picture painted above, there are features of certain policies that are compatible with what is proposed for multigrade teaching, and/or there are developments relating to multigrade education. The discussion that follows focuses on these policies, particularly teacher education and development, curriculum and assessment.

### 4.1.1 Teacher education and development

*The National Policy Framework for Teacher Education and Development* (NPFTED) introduced in 2007 stipulates the norms and standards for teacher education and development in South Africa (DoE 2007b). While the framework identifies multigrade teaching as an issue facing teachers, particularly in rural schools, it does not go further than that. It correctly draws on the MCTE report to mention problems of teaching in multigrade classes faced by rural teachers such as, among others, a shortage of qualified and competent teachers, under-resourced school facilities and limited access to professional development (DoE 2007b). The framework also points out that “in many rural schools, especially farms schools, the sizes (of classes) are so small that they are combined for multigrade teaching” (DoE 2007b: 9).

Other than identifying these as problems, the policy fails to ensure that this influences the kind of policy proposals made in terms of IPET and CPTD programmes. In fact, the multigrade issue is only mentioned on these two occasions in the document. The multigrade literature suggests the need for training specific to multigrade teaching for teaching to be effective in the schools concerned (Little 1995; Birch & Lally 1995).

Early in 2011, the two departments of education unveiled the *Integrated Strategic Planning Framework for Teacher Education and Development in South Africa* for the period 2011 to 2025. As part of the training intended, the plan states that “in all rural primary schools where multigrade teaching is the norm, teachers will be targeted for development in multigrade teaching strategies, with a particular focus on literacy and numeracy” (Departments of Basic Education and Higher Education and Training 2011: 10). In line with this development, training of multigrade teachers is intended to start in five provinces in 2012.

### 4.1.2 Curriculum

The post-apartheid curriculum policy has been through two revisions. The first was a revision of *Curriculum 2005* (C2005), which was implemented from 1998 to the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) following problems, including complex language and confusing terminology; the absence of conceptual coherence in the design structure; and the unrealistic number of
learning areas reported by the C2005 ministerial review committee (Ministry of Education 2000: 2). The second is the revision of the NCS to the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) following a ministerial committee’s findings of problems with the NCS implementation. Among these problems are the absence of a clear, widely communicated plan for the implementation and support of the NCS; teacher workload and administrative burden; and lack of clarity, and confusion among parents and teachers, around assessment issues (Ministry of Basic Education 2009). The CAPS implementation commences in 2012.

Notwithstanding all these revisions, the South African schooling curriculum has remained oriented towards a monograde class. It was only in 2009, with the release of the Report of the Task Team for the Review of the Implementation of the National Curriculum Statement (Ministry of Basic Education 2009) that multigrade teaching was identified as a curriculum issue. The report identifies multigrade classes as one of the teaching contexts within the South African education system, and also identifies the related problem of lack of policy guidance on multigrade teaching. The report states: “Separate, special guideline documents...for multi-grade classes will be developed, aligned to the Curriculum and Assessment Policy documents” (Ministry of Basic Education 2009: 27). However, this has yet to be undertaken.

Despite the fact that the curriculum does not attend to multigrade teaching, the post-apartheid curriculum is compatible with what is proposed for multigrade teaching. Specifically, the curriculum adopts a learner-centred approach to teaching and learning. The literature suggests that learner-centred approaches rather than transmission approaches are conducive to multigrade teaching (Brown 2008), given the workload involved in multigrade teaching settings (Kyne 2005).

Learner-centred approaches to teaching embrace grouping methodologies based on constructivist theory, and on cooperative learning theory, which is based on the work of John Dewey. In Dewey’s progressive theory, classrooms are seen as sites for learning democratic societal values – and therefore they should reflect such values. Constructivist theory, key advocates of which are Lev Vygotsky and Jean Piaget, is founded on the view that it is the process of learners’ active engagement with problems and discovery of solutions that effects cognitive change. For Vygotsky, learners learn more as a result of engagement with peers and adults who are advanced in terms of capabilities (Dossey 1992; Sierpinska & Lerman 1996, cited in Brown 2008). Thus, cooperative learning is underpinned by an understanding that learners are active creators of knowledge, rather than simply passive recipients of knowledge.

### 4.1.3 Assessment

The three curriculum revisions have meant three accompanying assessment policies over the post-apartheid period:

- **Assessment Policy in the General Education and Training Band, Grades R-9 and ABET** (DoE 1998).
- **National Policy on Assessment and Qualifications for Schools in the General Education and Training Band** (DoE 2007a).
- **National Protocol for Assessment, Grades R–12** (DBE 2011a).

However, all three policies have adopted features similar to those proposed for multigrade teaching. One of the features of the post-apartheid assessment policies is the use of both informal (assessment for learning) and formal (assessment of learning) assessment. Among the
examples of formal assessments are projects, oral presentations, demonstrations, performances, tests, examinations and practical demonstrations (DBE 2011a).

Another feature of assessment policy post-apartheid is that, contrary to the apartheid-era assessment policy – the focus of which was summative assessment – now the assessment policy embraces both continuous/formative and summative assessment. It is mandatory that continuous assessment contributes to the final mark. In fact, according to the National Protocol for Assessment, Grades R–12, which accompanies the CAPS, school-based assessment (continuous assessment) is “a compulsory component for progression in all different school phases” (DoE 2011a), accounting for 100% in the Foundation Phase, 75% in the Intermediate Phase, 40% in the Senior Phase, and 25% in the Further Education and Training Phase. The NCS assessment policy before this suggested that continuous assessment should constitute 100% of the Grade R–8 assessment programme, and 75% of the Grade 9 assessment (DoE 2007a).

Hargreaves (2001) argues that multigrade settings lend themselves to assessment systems aimed at promoting learning (or formative assessment), rather than to those aimed at promoting, selecting or certifying learners, which are largely focused on learners covering the curriculum prescribed for the grade (or summative assessment). She hypothesises that unlike monograde settings, multigrade settings permit teachers to identify learning differences among learners, which has the potential for enhancing learning. She suggests: “[A]lternative approaches to assessment, alongside promotion examinations, are therefore likely to enhance learning” (Hargreaves 2001: 55).

Like the assessment proposed by Hargreaves for multigrade settings, the post-apartheid assessment policy adopts a criterion-referenced approach (the practice of comparing learner achievement to set learning criteria) in the place of the norm-referenced approach (the practice of comparing learners against one another) of the previous regime. The National Protocol for Assessment, Grades R–12 points out:

Teachers must ensure that assessment criteria are very clear to the learners before the assessment process. This involves explaining to the learners which knowledge and skills are being assessed and the required length of responses. (DBE 2011a: 5)

Informing learners of the criteria against which they are going to be assessed is one of the suggestions Hargreaves (2001) makes in relation to enhancing learning in multigrade settings.

While the assessment policy gives the teacher the overall responsibility for assessment, it also makes provision for self-assessment and peer assessment by learners, as well as the involvement of other stakeholders such as parents, and of education support services such as speech therapists, and so on.

Based on the above discussion, it can be argued that the South African assessment policy provides an enabling environment for the kind of assessment conducive to multigrade settings.

4.1.4 Conclusion

On the whole, there is no policy on multigrade education in South Africa. That said, there are features within certain policies – such as those relating to the curriculum and assessment – that are compatible with what is recommended for effective multigrade education.
In addition, there are developments – such as the recommendations for CAPS specific to multigrade schools, and the inclusion in the recent plan for teacher education and development of the training of multigrade teachers – that are beginning to put some focus on multigrade education. These efforts are encouraging and commendable.

However, the multigrade education question warrants a more holistic strategy, and this study attests to this fact. The closure of the Rural Education Directorate is a threat to the focus on multigrade education. In an overwhelmingly monograde class-focused environment like ours, unless multigrade education is deliberately recognised through policy, it is highly unlikely for it to be attended to. Also important is the alignment of key policies to the multigrade policy once it has been formulated.

### 4.2 Context of participating schools

Education and rural development are inextricably linked. This inter-relationship has historical roots and has evolved over time. Today rural development and rural education are closely tied to social and economic transformation, or the absence thereof, in the new democracy in South Africa (see Nelson Mandela Foundation 2005, Chapter 7).

Table 4.1 below provides basic information about the schools at which the research for the current study was conducted.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Quintile</th>
<th>2009 learner enrolment</th>
<th>Teachers</th>
<th>Multigrade classes</th>
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<td>Emang</td>
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<td>89</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>R and 1; 2 and 3; 4 and 5; 6 and 7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Keitumetse</td>
<td>Quintile 1</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>R, 1, 2 and 3; 4, 5 and 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lokang</td>
<td>Quintile 1</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2 and 3; 5 and 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathapelo</td>
<td>Quintile 3</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>R and 1; 2 and 3; 4, 5 and 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moeti</td>
<td>Quintile 2</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2 and 3; 4, 5 and 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pietersburg</td>
<td>Quintile 5</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4 and 5; 6 and 7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Table 4.1 shows, the schools are relatively small. Lokang is the largest school from among the participating schools, with a learner population of 190. The number of teachers at these schools ranges from two to six. By implication, these schools have a low teacher:learner ratio, ranging from eight at Pietersburg to 32 at Lokang. The very low teacher:learner ratio at Pietersburg is explained by the fact that the school’s governing body appointed additional teachers. All teachers at the other schools were paid by the DoE. The low teacher:learner ratio in those schools suggests that the education department does give some consideration to the contexts of small schools by not strictly applying the Post Provisioning Norms (PPN) policy, which suggests a ratio of 1:40 for primary schools.
The dominant clustering pattern is one where two grades are put together, and this is evident in all schools, with the exception of Keitumetse. However, some schools combine patterns where two grades and three grades would be clustered. Keitumetse is the only school that has up to four grades in the Foundation Phase, and this is explained by the fact that there were only two teachers. It is worth noting that in their decisions regarding what grades to cluster, schools have tended to keep classes multigrade within phases. According to the principal of Emang, the school ensures, for fear of complicating a class, that the classes clustered together are those in the same phase. However, it appears that this is not always possible, as this is one of the two schools that also have multigrade classes that straddle both the Intermediate and Senior Phases, that is, Grades 6 and 7 respectively.

In the case of Lokang, clustering Grade 4 with Grade 5 was identified as the most challenging, given that Grade 4 is a huge jump from Grade 3. In Grade 3 learners had been taught a few learning areas in Setswana, which grew to nine learning areas being taught in English in Grade 4. A decision has, therefore, been made to keep Grade 4 as a monograde class. The same applies to Grade 7. What this suggests is that the configuration of multigrade classes is not a purely simplistic and mechanical process, but one that involves reflection and the consideration of implications of different patterns of clustering grades for teaching and learning. Therefore, the thinking that underpins the clustering of multigrade classes needs to be understood in the context of individual schools, and support from education departments should take this into account. That said, the reason for multigrade teaching in all schools appears to be a combination of low learner enrolments and the effects of the PPN, which provides teachers on the basis of the number of learners enrolled at the school.

We found variation in the contexts of these schools. One school had originally been built to serve a white farming community. It now served the black community, many of whom had bought well-built houses from whites, in the surrounding area. The school had a good infrastructure, facilities, sports grounds and a hostel accommodating all the students. Another school was historically white and had remained a white, Afrikaans-speaking school. It too had adequate facilities such as furniture, fencing, sports fields and a hostel. Its classrooms were neat and clean. While the school community was described as middle class and not rich, it was able to employ two additional teachers, paid for by parents.

The remaining schools, however, were situated in conditions of stark poverty, often surrounded by barren land. Schools were separated by distance from other villages and schools, and from the district offices of the DBE. At least one of these schools was part of a community that has suffered two major relocations and land dispossession under apartheid. The roads leading to the schools were in poor condition, children sat on cracked, broken, plastic chairs, and facilities such as toilets were non-existent or unhygienic. One teacher attributed the declining birth rate in the community to the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

Having provided a broad overview of the six schools, we now try to paint a richer and more textured description of a single school. The excerpt below comes from the notes written by two of the researchers who conducted the fieldwork. The excerpt graphically captures the context of multigrade teaching at one of the schools we visited. The stories of location and context varied, of course, but they were variations on the general theme of neglect and poorly resourced black multigrade schools in rural areas.
Excerpt – notes on one of the case study schools

Begun in 1970, Keitumetse Primary School is located at Esdale, some 70 km from Ganyesa, which in turn is 70 km northwest of Vryburg, up towards the border with Botswana. Though now a tiny school – it has a total of 32 learners and two teachers – it is not a farm school. It was once large enough to be a monograde school, but a dwindling community compelled this school to convert to multigrade in 1999...

This school serves the remnants of a community that over time had to endure two major up-rootings and relocations owing to the double dispossession of their land by apartheid authorities, who gave their fertile and salt-producing land to others. This community now lives on flat, sandy soil, with large bare patches between low thorn bushes. Though the vegetation is unusually green and comparatively lush now, owing to very good rains this year (2009), we saw no sign of domestic fruit trees, vegetable gardens or planting of maize or sorghum. Wild berries and other uncultivated fruits do grow there. However, we were told that it is possible to cultivate fruit-bearing trees and to grow vegetables.

This school is unlikely to be anything more than a small multigrade one. Wage-earning adults do not live in this village and they take their children with them to towns where they work, like Vryburg and Rustenburg. And, of course, their children are put to school in those towns. Further, Keitumetse Primary only goes up to Grade 6 and so a shift has to be made for children to complete their primary schooling before entering secondary school. We asked a member of the SGB [School Governing Body] whether there was any likelihood of the village or community expanding, and she remarked wryly that with the threat of HIV and AIDS now, people use condoms and so the birth rate has dropped.

This village feels and is remote from other human settlements. It does have electricity and borehole water, but it is mainly inaccessible by telephone, including cellphones, though the houses do have access to TV. Except for the petrol-powered borehole pump filling water tanks, there is a deep silence, broken only by the bray of a donkey or the occasional bellow from a calf. Otherwise, there are the chants of rote learning, choral answers and reading, and the drone of instruction from the two classrooms in which learning and teaching take place.

There are many domestic animals in this area, especially donkeys, goats and cattle. When we arrived with the two teachers in our car on the Monday morning, the long concrete platform that runs along the three classrooms was heavily littered with pungent goat droppings. And because the soil was slightly damp, we worked all day in the acrid smell of goat turds and goat urine.

The old school building consists of three classrooms that adjoin each other in a block under a newish tin roof without ceilings. The school is electrified but a single kettle trips the power, so we never could make tea or coffee. The only equipment that this school has is a computer, which nobody knows how to use and which is taken off the premises every Friday and brought back on Monday. The only other resource that the school has is a QIDS UP [Quality Improvement, Development, Support and Upliftment Programme] library. Something very important that is missing is a photocopier, a machine that we regard as essential to assisting with the multiple demands of multigrade teaching and learning.
The two classrooms at each end of the block are the ones in use. The central room is used by the teachers for meeting and storage, and it is also the ‘school hall’ i.e. the place where parents and the SGB meet with the principal. All the plastic chairs are cracked and broken, so every child sits on at least two small red plastic chairs (one on top of the other) and teachers use the bigger blue, but also split, plastic chairs...

Across the way from this block of three classrooms, there is a ruin, or else the crumbling remnants, of two further classrooms that might one day have been needed. Now this structure with its tall yellow walls is a place for children to play in at break time.

The school is set in an environment that appears remote, lonely and isolated to those who do not live there and probably to those who do. But it is the world of these children. Traffic is extremely light: we saw or heard no vehicles except towards the end of the day.

Local women builders erected two single-room cottages on the school grounds for the teachers to sleep over in. These are small, poky and serve as kitchen, bathroom and bedroom. The low unceileded roof makes them ovens in the heat of this region.

The two teachers do sometimes sleep in these ‘cottages’ to save themselves the tough journey to Ganyesa. Then they usually share a cottage for safety’s sake.

There is no toilet on the school grounds and adults have to brave a dubious-looking tin shed that contains an unsavoury pit lavatory, which is located 200 metres outside the school. Children use the surrounding bushes in the company of goats and chickens.

The road between Ganyesa and Esdale is bad: very stony at times, so corrugated in sections that one feels as if one is going backwards, deep sand in treacherous patches and scores of animals that find the road a good place for meeting, crossing at the last moment, rolling in the dust and otherwise just dreaming. The journey usually takes well over an hour, which is quicker than the many donkey carts that clip along.

4.3 Curriculum adaptation and planning

This sub-section of the report synthesises the findings of the case studies relating to the ways in which multigrade teachers engage with the curriculum. Specifically, we cover two aspects of curriculum relating to curriculum planning, namely, teachers’ adaptation of the curriculum and their preparation of lesson plans.

4.3.1 Curriculum adaptation

Teachers may adopt a range of curriculum adaptation strategies in multigrade classes, although a key element of change is about focusing on individual or group differences when preparing the curriculum. Some useful and relevant adaptations are as follows:

- Multi-year curriculum spans: In this strategy, units of curriculum content are spread across two to three grades rather than one. All learners work through common topics and activities
(Daniel 1988; Little 2005). In other words, all learners tackle the same learning area at the same time, no matter their grade. It is important to note that this strategy can only be used in those learning areas where the sequence of what is taught across the grades is immaterial, as is possibly the case in some social science topics. Obviously it cannot be used in learning areas such as Mathematics and Language Studies. The benefit of this strategy is that teachers do not have additional work arising from the multigrade teaching arrangement.

- Differentiated curricula: In this strategy, the same general topic/theme is covered with all learners. In this arrangement, Vithanapathirana (2006) suggests that learners in each grade group engage in learning tasks appropriate to their level of learning.

- Quasi monograde: In this strategy, Little (2005) points out that the teacher teaches grade groups, in turn, as if they were monograded. Learners follow the same or a different subject at the same time. Teachers may divide their time equally between grade groups, or they may deliberately divide their time unequally, choosing subjects or tasks within subjects that require different levels of teacher contact.

- Learner- and materials-centred: The fourth strategy depends more on the learner and the learning materials than on teacher input (Little 2005). The curriculum is translated into self-study graded learning guides. Learners work through these at their own speed with support from the teacher and structured assessment tasks (Little 2005). Learning is constructed as involving a relationship between learner, learning materials and teacher (Colbert, Chiappe & Arboleda 1993).

Curriculum adaptation for multigrade teaching was found to be non-existent at the six participating schools. The principal at Pietersburg said that no curriculum adaptations were necessary. Interviews with teachers at Moeti revealed that the school had never received any support regarding curriculum planning. They had, however, been provided with the NCS as well as other policy documents and departmental circulars. One principal stated that whatever planning teachers did was done by trial and error and the use of strategies that appeared to work. Teachers used the curriculum designed for monograde classes in the multigrade setup. The assertion that there was no curriculum adaptation was confirmed by the provincial and district officials. One of the reasons, according to one of the provincial officials, was that,

...we don’t have the requisite capacity, even within our professional support service – people who have that kind of expertise to support multigrade, that’s one area where we need a lot of support because we have actually tended to...treat schools the same way.

The absence of curriculum adaptation may also have something to do with the general lack of acknowledgement of the existence of multigrade teaching in the country, as well as the lack of training in multigrade teaching for teachers. However, teaching strategies adopted by teachers point to some form of adaptation, particularly differentiated and quasi monograde strategies, as will be evident below.

### 4.3.2 Lesson plans

The fact that there was no curriculum adaptation did not mean that there was no curriculum planning at all. Year plans, term plans, lesson plans and timetables were some of the common
curriculum planning tools used. However, there were concerns in terms of adherence to the planning requirements, especially when it came to lesson planning. Table 4.2 below shows the findings in relation to lesson plans.

Table 4.2: Lesson planning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Grades</th>
<th>Learning areas, and number of lessons observed</th>
<th>Lesson planning method</th>
<th>Lesson plans – erratic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Individual planning</td>
<td>Phase planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emang</td>
<td>Grades 2 and 3</td>
<td>2 Numeracy; 1 Setswana Literacy; 1 English Literacy</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keitumetse</td>
<td>Grades 4, 5 and 6</td>
<td>1 Numeracy; 1 English Literacy</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lokang</td>
<td>Grades R–3</td>
<td>1 Numeracy/Literacy</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathapelo</td>
<td>Grades 1–3</td>
<td>2 Numeracy; 1 Setswana Literacy; 1 English Literacy</td>
<td></td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moeti</td>
<td>Grades 2 and 3</td>
<td>2 Literacy; 2 Numeracy</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pietersburg</td>
<td>Grades 6 and 7</td>
<td>1 Numeracy: Mathematics</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Grades 4 and 5</td>
<td>1 Afrikaans Literacy</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For example, at Mathapelo the teacher could not produce lesson plans when we asked for them and only produced them at a later stage. This may suggest that the teacher may have developed these plans specifically for the researchers.

Similarly, a teacher at Moeti only provided researchers with a timetable on the first day of classroom observations and indicated that she did not have lesson plans for the lesson they observed on the day. These lesson plans were provided on the second day of observation.

At Lokang a teacher admitted to having developed the lesson plans specifically for the researchers for the first of the two lessons observed. No plan was provided for the other lesson. The absence of a lesson plan placed the teacher in a difficult position because at one point she could not recall what she wanted the learners to do.

We found in one school that one teacher produced lesson plans while the other was not able to. While a teacher at Pietersburg showed researchers meticulous curriculum planning records for Literacy and Numeracy, the principal indicated that he did not have the time to keep proper records. Most of his ‘spare time’ went into running the principal’s office, completing administrative and secretarial duties. Also, he said that it was not practical to plan each lesson and then strictly to follow such plans. He said there were, for example, seven subjects in Grades 4 and 5 which, if these two classes were combined, meant that he was supposed to teach 14 lessons per day.
The literature suggests that multigrade teachers find planning and preparation for multigrade classes more difficult and time-consuming than that for monograde classes, given that they have to plan for multiple grades (Berry & Little 2007).

The fact that teachers do not always have lesson plans is an issue of concern for teaching practices in a multigrade class. For Berry (2007), planning for a multigrade class is all the more important given the need to think carefully about how to teach the various grades. The practice of careful planning serves to minimise the amount of “dead time”, while maximising the amount of time devoted to meaningful interaction between the teacher and learners in a multigrade class, according to Berry (2007). Absence of lesson plans can potentially lead to ineffective multigrade teaching.

Approaches to planning differed across schools, with some schools reporting that they approached planning as individuals, and others reporting that teachers planned as a group of phase teachers. Phase planning was reported at Moeti where, according to the principal, the three Foundation Phase teachers (Grades R, 1, 2 and 3) met to plan for the whole year, while he and the Intermediate Phase teacher met to plan for the Intermediate Phase (Grade 4, 5 and 6). They used the same approach for the term plans. Planning together as a phase was preferred at the school because it enabled teachers to learn from one another and it ensured that all curriculum aspects were included. Further, phase planning appeared to be preferred for purposes of integration and articulation between the learning areas and programmes and ensured better accountability. In the view of the principal of Moeti, it was easier for the Foundation Phase teachers to meet and plan their curriculum as they have three learning programmes (Literacy, Numeracy and Life Skills) compared to the nine learning areas the Intermediate Phase teachers had to deal with.

The practice of phase planning was not possible at some schools largely because of the limited number of teachers working in a particular phase. The Grades 2 and 3 class teacher at Emang indicated that the teachers at her school did not benefit from group phase planning that could work in monograde schools, because of the small number of teachers involved. For example, up until the beginning of 2009 she was the only Foundation Phase teacher at the school. This situation was further exacerbated by teachers’ workloads.

Similarly Keitumetse had two teachers – one for the Foundation Phase and the other for the Intermediate Phase. The principal (also Intermediate Phase teacher) planned all learning areas for the three grades (4, 5 and 6) for each week, while the other teacher planned for the Foundation Phase learning programmes for Grades R–3. Where there is only one teacher per phase, multigrade teachers find themselves in professional isolation as they have no one to work with and bounce ideas off.

The NCS review team found that, generally, teachers across South Africa raised concerns about the onerous nature of administrative requirements and the complicated nature of planning that did not necessarily lead to improvement of teaching and learning (Ministry of Basic Education 2009). The situation is obviously made more difficult in the case of multigrade settings. Clearly, there is a danger that multigrade teachers could spend most of their time writing out lesson plans rather than teaching or grading learners’ work. On the other hand, no planning at all (and no other records related to teaching and learning) could be an indicator of teachers not doing their work and making excuses for not doing so. The literature says that lessons plans are important for effective teaching. Perhaps the answer lies in teachers planning broadly with colleagues in periods of, say, two weeks, rather than writing out plans for each lesson and drowning in paperwork.
4.4 Teaching practices

This sub-section focuses on practices, particularly in relation to classroom and learner organisational strategies as well as teaching strategies.

4.4.1 Classroom and learner organisational strategies

How classrooms and learners are organised is crucial for learning and teaching. Table 4.3 below summarises the learner organisational strategies observed at the case study schools.

Table 4.3: Learner organisational strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Grades</th>
<th>Learning areas, and number of lessons observed</th>
<th>Within-grade groups</th>
<th>Cross-grade groups</th>
<th>Unstructured cross-grade groups</th>
<th>Grade rows</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emang</td>
<td>Grades 2 and 3</td>
<td>2 Numeracy; 1 Setswana Literacy; 1 English Literacy</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keitumetse</td>
<td>Grades 4, 5 and 6</td>
<td>1 Numeracy; 1 English Literacy</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Grades R–3</td>
<td>1 Numeracy/Literacy</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lokang</td>
<td>Grades 5 and 6</td>
<td>2 English Literacy; 1 Mathematics</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathapelo</td>
<td>Grades 1–3</td>
<td>2 Numeracy; 1 Setswana Literacy; 1 English Literacy</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moeti</td>
<td>Grades 2 and 3</td>
<td>2 Literacy; 2 Numeracy</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pietersburg</td>
<td>Grades 6 and 7</td>
<td>1 Numeracy: Mathematics</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Grades 4 and 5</td>
<td>1 Afrikaans Literacy</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the table above shows, the most common practice of organising learners among multigrade teachers we interacted with was grouping. This practice is in line with what the literature on multigrade teaching suggests. To maximise learning opportunities for learners, it is recommended that multigrade teachers employ a variety of within-grade and cross-grade grouping strategies. Among the strategies advocated are whole-class grouping, small groups and pair groups where older and more advanced learners could tutor those who are younger and less advanced (Berry 2007). Little (2005) adds self-learning as another strategy for organising learners for learning in the classroom.

Teachers in the participating schools tended to use within-grade grouping strategies. For example, at Emang learners in the Grades 2 and 3 class were organised into a number of groups within each grade. They sat around tables that were placed side by side so as to form a bigger table. The teacher ensured that learners were engaged at all times in the introduction to new concepts, or in doing activities individually, or as a group.
Similarly, at Mathapelo learners were grouped according to their grades to ensure that grade-specific differences in the curriculum were met. The desks of each grade were arranged in a U-shape. This arrangement, however, meant that the chalkboard was not visible to all learners and about three of them had to change seats when working from the chalkboard.

Keitumetse’s Foundation Phase class exhibited a similar practice. Here the teacher had a huge empty space in the middle of the classroom, having located two groups at one end of the large room, and two groups at the other end. She moved back and forth from group to group.

A slightly different kind of within-grade grouping was also observed. At Moeti, for example, the Grades 2 and 3 class was organised into two groups of learners according to their respective grades. Facing the board, Grade 2 learners sat on the right side of the room and Grade 3s sat on the left side of the room. Learner desks were linked together to form one large work table. Two extra desks were attached at the right corner of the Grade 3 learner work table. These desks seated two boys who were said to be better performing and at a more advanced level than the rest of the Grade 3 learners.

Another kind of grouping strategy that was observed, albeit to a lesser extent, was cross-grade grouping. This was observed in Emang’s Grades 2 and 3 class during a Numeracy lesson. In this case, the teacher requested learners to go outside the classroom to conduct soil measurement experiments. The teacher asked the learners to work in groups, but did not give guidelines on how the groups should be composed. What resulted was that while most of the groups remained within-grade groups, some of them were cross-grade probably by learner choice, rather than structured by the teacher.

Yet another grouping strategy observed was one that combined elements of both within-grade and cross-grade grouping strategies. This was seen at Lokang, where learners were seated in three rows with four to five learners in each row. There was an attempt at providing a demarcation for the two grades. The first row, which was closest to the door, catered for Grade 6 learners, while the row to the extreme right of the door had Grade 5 learners. The middle row had a combination of Grades 5 and 6 learners, with one table having both grades. The teacher, however, pointed out that the seating arrangement was not by design but that it was in order to accommodate both grades. It was pointed out by the teacher that one could turn and look in a certain direction when talking to learners in a particular grade (even though there was a middle row with both grades). Further, in the group that had both grades at one table it was easy to make the mistake of instructing them as though they were one grade.

It is evident from the above that multigrade teachers have, in the main, embraced grouping methods in terms of their learner organisational strategies. This shift from arranging learners in rows, which dominated most teaching and learning settings in the past, can be attributed to the post-apartheid curriculum, which – as mentioned earlier – advanced learner-centred approaches to learning and a cooperative learning approach rather than the traditional teacher-centred approach. What is of concern, however, is that the grouping methods observed at our case study schools tended to be just seating arrangements, rather than strategies to facilitate cooperative learning among learners. As will be evident in the discussion of teaching strategies, lessons tended to be teacher-centred, with the teacher delivering the lesson followed by activities to be completed by individual learners. Only in Emang’s Grades 2 and 3 class Numeracy lessons was group work observed.
Teachers appear to have missed the point behind employing grouping strategies. Organising learners into small groups and pairs is rooted in an acknowledgement that teachers are not the only sources of knowledge, but that learners are themselves sources of knowledge. There was no evidence of teachers pairing learners. Learners appear to understand the reality of their peers as sources of knowledge as they were seen on various occasions tapping into each other’s knowledge by asking for clarity and assistance from their classmates. A case in point is that of the Grades 5 and 6 class at Lokang, where the teacher assigned a task to Grade 5 learners, while she continued with direct instruction of Grade 6 learners. Owing to insufficient instructions from the teacher on how to complete the task, learners were seen working in pairs, while others seemed to be asking for clarity from the group as a whole. However, this kind of behaviour was not permitted in all cases. The Intermediate Phase teacher at Keitumetse, for example, made it clear that learners were expected to work silently so as not to disturb the other grades, and copying or assistance from other learners in the group was actively discouraged by the teacher. She was not in favour of individuals succeeding or failing by means of help from other learners.

For cooperative learning to be effective, it needs to be structured and facilitated by the teacher. Teachers need to harness the knowledge that learners bring and draw on learners as resources in their classes. As Ames (2007: 62) points out:

One of the most important...features is the rich experience of children in multi-age groups in other learning situations outside the school. Thus, in the context of home and community, children are used to playing, learning and working with other adults and children of different ages. The multi-age character of this interaction is what makes learning possible in such a context. The multigrade school and teachers might take advantage of this if more attention was given to children’s lives outside the school walls.

Supporting this view, Veenman (1995, cited in Berry 2007) posits that one of the explanations for multigrade learners not performing better when tested for cognitive ability is the limited utilisation of cooperative group work.

Notwithstanding the general trend towards grouping of learners, practices that exhibited more traditional ways of organising learners were also observed. Learners in the classes at Pietersburg were seated in desks arranged in rows facing the teacher. Here, there was no attempt at grouping the learners. However, the different grades were separated from one another.

Generally, there tended to be no variation in individual teacher practices in terms of learner organisational strategies during the time we spent at the schools. Teachers tended to stick to a particular strategy in the lessons observed. This was with the exception of the Keitumetse Intermediate Phase teacher, who was said to take into account learners’ ages, grades and abilities, separating them at times and combining them at others, as well as using various permutations when teaching. Here, learners who worked fast were given more challenging worksheets than the others. This teacher demonstrated a high degree of competence in handling multigrade settings.

Limited variation in terms of organisational strategies can be explained in one of two ways. One explanation could be that observations were conducted over two days of the week spent at the school, which did not allow observation of a whole range of practices. Even more likely, however, is that it could also be as a result of lack of exposure to and lack of training on what
other learner organisational strategies are available and how these could be employed in a multigrade class. Keeping learners in a multigrade class engaged in meaningful activities at all times requires knowledge of the various strategies and the skills to match appropriate strategies to activities. Lingam (2007) avers that effective multigrade teaching entails the use of a range of organisational strategies, which must be included in teacher preparation. Teachers must be aware of different ways of grouping learners, the importance of independent study areas where learners can go when they have finished their work, and approaches to record keeping that are more flexible than those prevalent in the monograde classroom (Kyne 2005). Another key issue to add is the need for teachers to be made aware of the theoretical underpinnings of various learner organisational strategies.

4.4.2 Teaching strategies

Multigrade teaching has no separate teaching strategies from those used in monograde classes. However, the literature suggests that multigrade teachers need to be flexible in their use of teaching strategies to ensure effective teaching. The topic, subject or activity used in lessons should determine the choice of strategies that a multigrade teacher uses (Collingwood 1991). Among the strategies highlighted in the literature are whole-class teaching, grade (differentiated) teaching and peer teaching.

In the schools participating in the current study, two teaching strategies were observed. The first teaching strategy is a case where the teacher teaches each grade at a time as if it were in a monograde class. At Pietersburg, for example, during the Numeracy lesson, the Grades 6 and 7 teacher worked through addition and subtraction of fractions with Grade 7 learners. Once he was satisfied that these learners understood the work, he gave them an exercise and moved on to do addition of large numbers with Grade 6 learners.

There were 13 learners in the classroom at Pietersburg, seated in desks arranged in four rows facing the teacher. The Grade 7s were separated from the Grade 6s. There were colourful charts on the wall at the back of the room, and along the sides were windows, cupboards, an exhibition, and chalkboards. In front of the room was a table for the teacher’s use and a chalkboard. There were fans on the ceiling. The classroom was spacious enough for the number of learners in the room, and was also neat and clean.

The teacher started the lesson by addressing the Grade 7s. The topic was addition and subtraction of fractions. The teacher worked through a problem on the chalkboard, asking individual learners questions. There were two different ways to arrive at the correct answer. The procedures and the logic involved were explained at every step.
Method 1

\[ \frac{4}{3} = \frac{8}{6} + \frac{19}{6} = \frac{27}{6} \text{ (finding a common denominator; addition of numerators)} \]

= \frac{27}{6} \text{ (simplifying the fraction)}

= \frac{9}{2} \text{ (simplifying the fraction further)}

= 4 \frac{1}{2}

Method 2

\[ 1 \frac{1}{3} + 3 \frac{1}{6} \]

= \left(1 + 3\right) + \left(\frac{1}{3} + \frac{1}{6}\right) \text{ (separating numerals and fractions)}

= 4 + \frac{3}{6} \text{ (adding numerals; adding fractions: finding common denominator, adding)}

= 4 + \frac{1}{2} \text{ (simplifying)}

= 4 \frac{1}{2}

It appeared that everyone knew the work well. The Grade 7 learners were asked to complete an exercise in their textbooks. The first problem was \(\frac{33}{5} + \frac{11}{3}\).

Turning to the Grade 6s, the teacher said that they were going to look at how to add large numbers – in this case: \(8 \, 733 + 6 \, 500\). There were two methods that could be used to arrive at the correct answer.

Method 1

The numbers are written below one another, paying careful attention to placing units under units, tens under tens, etc. and then adding.

\[
\begin{align*}
8 \, 733 & \\
+ & 6 \, 500 \\
\hline
15 \, 233
\end{align*}
\]

Method 2

\[
\begin{align*}
8 \, 733 + 6 \, 500 & \\
8 \, 000 + 6 \, 000 & = 14 \, 000 \\
700 + 500 & = 1 \, 200 \\
30 + 0 & = 30 \\
3 + 0 & = 3 \\
\hline
15 \, 233
\end{align*}
\]
The teaching method consisted of questions and answers from individual learners, explanations for the steps followed, and understanding the logic involved. From their responses it appeared that the class understood the work. The learners were then asked to complete an exercise using their textbooks. One of the more complicated examples was $721 \ 267 + 14 \ 502 \ 167 + 8 \ 041 + 304 \ 261 \ 741$. The teacher used whole-class teaching, direct instruction, discussion and problem-solving. The class was well managed. The learners were attentive. There were no discipline problems at all.

The pedagogy at this school relied greatly on direct instruction and the lecture method. A single example of the use of innovative pedagogy in promoting effective teaching as an alternative to the widespread use of whole-class teaching is peer tutoring. Topping (1988, 1998) discusses peer tutoring across various subjects for different age levels in Britain. There were cognitive and affective gains in pairing learners during reading exercises in the classroom. Elaborate resources are not required, although appropriate reading materials were important. Holdaway (1979) suggests that teachers can develop reading materials that can be shared, by transcribing books onto newsprint paper.

The literature suggests that there is heavy reliance by multigrade teachers on the grade-by-grade teaching strategy, despite the possibilities of innovative teaching that can be used in multigrade settings (Veenman 1995; Berry 2007). As Berry (2007) points out, on the basis of his research in the Turks and Caicos Islands: “Multigrade teachers are likely to teach their classes as if they were several mini monograde classes, leading to heavy demands on the teacher’s classroom organisational skills” (2007: 34). A further consequence of this is that the amount of direct teaching given to learners is reduced. For Veenman (1995), reliance on this way of teaching multigrade classes reduces the effectiveness of multigrade teaching.

While adopting this monograde strategy does allow for grade-specific material to be taught, it is time-consuming and results in learners having to wait for a long time for their turn with the teacher. This is clearly evident in the case of Keitumetse, where some grades had not received the teacher’s attention until later in the day or week of our visit. This may be an explanation for the concerns raised by some of the teachers that they were not able to complete the curriculum prescribed for the year in multigrade classes.

The second teaching strategy observed was a combination of whole-class teaching with differentiated activities to be completed by learners in groups or individually. At Emang, following whole-class teaching in the Numeracy class, the teacher gave differentiated activities to the learners. The Grade 2 learners had to measure the length of straight lines provided in the worksheet, using a ruler. The Grade 3 learners had to measure soil, to determine the number of different measures that would go into various measuring cups.

A similar strategy was used in the Pietersburg Grades 4 and 5 class during an English lesson. After whole-class teaching, the teacher went on to give Grade 4 learners a worksheet titled, “Yesterday, today and tomorrow”, with a picture showing six people. Learners were required to state what each person was doing by writing down six verbs. The teacher then turned to the Grade 5 learners and gave them a worksheet that contained a number of idioms. They were asked to identify the verbs and underline them.

While using the same strategy, some teachers stated that they taught lessons at particular levels. For example, the principal of Moeti, who teaches a class of Grades 4, 5 and 6, stated that he pitched his lessons at the middle grade, that is, Grade 5. Similarly, the Grades 2 and 3 class teacher at the same school said she pitched hers at Grade 3 level. These teachers were aware of the
fact that this practice of pitching lessons at a specific level disadvantaged some of the learners. However, they hoped to counter any disadvantage by giving learners differentiated activities.

Whole-class teaching, on the one hand, ensures that all learners have more contact time with the teacher, while at the same time saving time and effort as it requires less preparation. However, it tends to disadvantage learners on the upper or lower end in terms of their ability (MUSE n.d.; Ames 2007). Differentiated activities, on the other hand, enable the teacher to attend to level-specific content, which ensures that learners are taught at their own level (Cash 2000). By using a differentiated activities strategy, the multigrade teachers were able to give learners grade-specific activities and this ensured that they met curriculum requirements in terms of grade learning outcomes.

However, there was no attempt to differentiate activities within a grade. According to Ames (2007), differentiation by grade levels negates addressing differences in terms of levels within grades. Employment of small groups such as mixed-ability, same-ability and social groups depending on the subject and/or activity is proposed as a measure for dealing with differences within grades where learners can engage in learning activities across levels (Collingwood 1991).

It is, therefore, crucial that multigrade teachers are exposed to the various strategies of teaching, and supported on how to apply them in multigrade contexts.

4.4.2.1 Struggling to teach and learn – and an example of mixed learning outcomes

In this sub-section we consider examples of teachers struggling to teach, and learners struggling to learn. A multigrade class with Grades 5 and 6 learners was observed. During these lessons learner participation was minimal. For most of the lesson the teacher used the question-and-answer technique in her teaching, which was ineffective. Learners did not respond to this method but the teacher continued nonetheless.

In the English Literacy class the teacher invited volunteers to read a poem. Getting no response, the teacher decided to question a number of individual learners. The learners, however, still did not respond and seemed rather uncomfortable – they did not make eye contact and stared at their desks. It seemed that the learners might not have understood the story and they appeared shy and withdrawn. The teacher then instructed the Grade 5 learners to read the poem. The learners read the poem aloud but very slowly. The teacher asked the Grade 6 learners to do the same. It was clear that the Grade 6 learners were the poorer readers of the two grades. We noted that some of them could hardly read the English text. At times the teacher used a lot of repetition to solicit learner reaction, especially when the learners struggled with the text. When this yielded no result, the teacher code-switched and translated every sentence of the text into Setswana. This did not work either and it was clear that the learners could not grasp the meaning of the text, not even in their mother tongue. It appeared that parts of the text were too difficult for them.

In another instance the teacher presented an incorrect explanation as to what the poem conveyed. She told the learners that the boy referred to in the poem suffered from a mental illness, which was not what the poem stated or implied. The teacher at times struggled with giving instructions in English and would complete the instructions in Setswana. The challenge, though, is that the language of teaching and learning for this lesson was English. However, to improve learners’ understanding, the teacher translated the text.
When it came to the levels of participation in Mathematics, the same challenges were observed. In teaching this learning area the teacher did her best to help the learners understand the concept of fractions. However, learners had to do work from their textbooks, which are written in English, and they found it difficult to do the work. This may point to poor content knowledge and language competence on the part of the teacher.

The workbooks collected and reviewed indicated that learners were given written work on a monthly basis. Bearing in mind that our observations took place in the third month of the year, not much work had been covered. Analysing the work presented in the learner workbooks served to confirm the suspicion that learners had a very poor understanding of what they were taught. Looking at the activities it was evident that the learners were struggling to understand the work. Their and their teacher’s command of the English language was so poor that they had difficulty in constructing sentences in English. The compositions that the learners had written were incomprehensible. What was even more disquieting was the fact that the work presented by ‘good’ learners was equally poor.

The situation was not as bleak everywhere. Looking at the exercises that learners completed in Numeracy and Literacy at Moeti, we found that some learners (about 50%) in each grade did the work with ease, while the other half struggled. The review of the writing books showed that learners were (almost daily for Literacy and twice a week for Numeracy) given written exercises, which the teacher regularly marked, making corrections and dating the grading. Although the teacher had indicated that teaching and learning was behind by about two months because she was still getting to know them better, learners’ exercises indicated signs of progress. A review of the learners’ workbooks showed that learners’ class activities, which were either on pieces of paper or exercise books, were given regularly in both learning programmes. Evidence from the workbooks showed that learners in both grades understood the written work. Grade 3 learners’ Literacy work appeared much neater and clearer than that of the Grade 2s. Another measure of learning effectiveness was that of learner pass rates for various assessments. Unfortunately, there were no records. The teacher explained that she regularly gave learners a lot of work in class, but no tests. She also said she had not started to record learners’ assessments until after the first term. This issue, however, may also arise in poorly resourced monograde schools.

4.4.2.2 The broader contexts of teaching and learning

In examining the broader contexts of teaching and learning in the North West Province we focus on themes that are common to all the teaching styles we observed, including those discussed above.

Because all the teaching took place in the absence of any formal training and national curriculum policies that could guide teaching and learning in multigrade classrooms specifically, it was based on teachers’ commonsense responses to their work. The teaching was not informed by any theoretical understanding of curriculum development and application for multigrade contexts. Warwick (1975, cited in Little 2007: 313) explains that the formal curriculum consists of several inter-related layers:

At the school level these include, inter alia, (i) teaching and learning activities observable in classrooms, supported by teaching and learning materials, (ii) the lesson of which these activities are a part, (iii) the theme of which the lesson is a part, (iv) the syllabus of which the theme is a part, (v) the subject to which this syllabus pertains, and (vi) the timetable in which this subject will appear for one or more periods or periods on one or more days.
Birch and Lally (1995), in promoting a more structured approach to curriculum development that could underpin and inform more effective classroom practices, propose training modules for teachers in multigrade schools that are divided into the following nine fields:

1. The psychological and philosophical foundations of multigrade teaching.
2. The school and its environment.
3. Techniques for developing specific programmes.
4. Teaching strategies.
5. Class management.
8. Problem-solving strategies.

What happens at schools and inside classrooms takes place in the wider contexts of the communities in which schools are embedded. These communities have socio-economic, historical, cultural and political lives. Parents and local leaders can be involved in the revision and improvement of the curriculum and in teaching and learning. We found little evidence of conscious attempts by teachers to make lessons socially relevant to their school communities or national development. Such projects in curriculum development should be framed broadly, because competing interpretations, views, programmes, organisations and actions constitute community and national life. Lessons provide ideal opportunities to problematise this rich diversity of thought and action within the community. Below, Kline (2002: 173) reports on the roles learners have played in the Escuela Nueva (EN) reforms of rural education in Latin America:

...student government requires students to take on leadership roles and make decisions that have tangible impacts in their school environment. Such involvement is aimed at teaching civic and democratic values. Students interact with their communities by making maps of the community, drawing on examples from local customs in their various activities, and inviting community members to the school to share knowledge about their communities. Through their active participation, both in and out of the classroom, the students are involved in the changes in their school... the EN model... helps break down the divisions between schools and the larger community...

These are examples of how what happens in the school can reflect what happens in the wider society.

4.5 Learning and teaching support materials

The literature suggests that adequate supply of materials is crucial to successful multigrade teaching in that it allows the teacher to work with some learners while others are engaged in individual or group activity (Lingam 2007; Vithanapathirana 2006; Little 2005). In addition, materials must be of the highest quality and relevance, and must be used by teachers as part of an integrated teaching strategy, in which teachers continue to play a vital part (Lingam 2007; Little 2005). Materials need not be seen as substitutes for the role of the teacher.

The current study found that all learning materials are provided by the PED. According to the principal of Mathapelo, the PED provided some of the materials through the QIDS UP, which had
provided textbooks and workbooks for both Literacy and Numeracy, plus other learning materials, since 2008. Materials provided by the QIDS UP were also seen at Emang, Keitumetse and Moeti.

In terms of the availability of relevant materials, the current study found variations. Pietersburg, Mathapelo and Lokang reported having sufficient learning materials. That said, the latter two schools raised concerns about the language of materials. In the case of Mathapelo, all materials other than home-language readers are in English, making translation necessary. At Lokang, Afrikaans books for Grade 7 learners were in short supply. Here, constant changes in the curriculum were blamed for the shortage of materials.

Concerns with the language of materials vis-a-vis the LoLT were also reported at Moeti and Emang. At Emang, the school struggles to get Numeracy materials in Setswana. In addition, both the principal and the multigrade teacher at Emang concurred that available materials were limited, with the result that about two to three learners would share a book; this raised concerns, especially when learners had to share books to complete their homework. On a number of occasions during the observation, copies were made for learners.

Similarly, while Keitumetse had a variety of textbooks, they were limited in number. However, unlike Emang, this school did not have a photocopier to reproduce materials for learners – an issue that needs to be attended to without delay.

Insufficiency of materials limits effective teaching in multigrade situations especially because, as pointed out earlier, multigrade learners spend a great deal of time learning on their own while waiting for the teacher’s attention. The fact that multigrade schools experience difficulties in accessing materials in the relevant language not only contradicts the South African Language in Education Policy (LiEP) but is also not supportive of language teaching and learning in particular, and teaching and learning in general, in schools. Translating materials can be a tedious and time-consuming process, especially for multigrade teachers who are already enormously pressed for time. The languages in which these materials are written should be in line with the overall language policy.

Despite the variations reported in terms of availability of materials, all schools concurred in pointing out that available materials were not multigrade specific. This echoes what is in the literature (Kyne 2005). Materials available to multigrade schools tend to be the same as those used in monograde classes. According to Little (2005), such materials are not effective in multigrade teaching. Instead, multigrade teaching requires special learning materials that need to be produced and supplied to schools. Little and Pridmore (2007) describe materials more suited for multigrade teaching as those that include a self-study element, which might be in the form of workbooks with a self-correction key, or a small classroom library that can be accessed independently by learners. Traditional textbooks could also be useful, but Little (2005) counsels that they need to be developed with the view of the learner rather than the teacher as an audience; and should also provide scope for development work for the production of school texts.

As the current study has shown, available materials are developed for teachers rather than learners. Multigrade teaching provides greater opportunities for teachers to teach thematically, across different grades in the same class. New learning materials should complement the pedagogies and teaching strategies, the assessment methods, and the learner organisational strategies of multigrade teaching. The new materials should speak to local community circumstances and events, as well as introduce learners to the wider world – nationally, regionally and internationally.
Little and Pridmore (2007) suggest that teachers need to be shown how to produce such self-study materials in a cost-effective way. These could include, for example, flash cards, instructional materials and workbooks. An example of successful use of self-study materials can be seen in the EN programme in Colombia, where individual learner guides were developed for the six core subjects in their curriculum, and learners can use these guides for learning at their own pace (Little 2005). The workbooks that the DBE is currently distributing to schools have the potential for supporting multigrade teaching. Research would be needed into the utilisation of such materials in multigrade settings and how they contribute to effective multigrade teaching.

4.6 Language of learning and teaching

The importance of language in teaching and learning cannot be sufficiently emphasised. Language is counted as one of the key factors (among others, such as socio-economic status, teaching methods and parental involvement) in the delivery of quality basic education, given that it is a vehicle for communicating and understanding what one is being taught (Alexander 2006; Benson 2005).

It is increasingly acknowledged, worldwide and particularly in post-colonial contexts, that first language is crucial in setting the basis for one's lifelong learning (Lüdi, cited in Alexander 2006; Benson 2005). However, the practice in many developing countries remains sharply contrasted to this realisation. These countries, in Africa and elsewhere, continue to use foreign languages (particularly those of their colonial masters) in education.

Obanya (2004: 10) equates teaching learners in their earlier years in a language not familiar to them to “starting a journey from its terminal point”, which he reckons is both mentally and physically taxing. As Benson (2005) avers, submersion (teaching in a language not familiar) results in teachers being compelled to translate or code-switch in order to help learners grasp the meaning. This way of teaching not only results in inefficient concept learning but also impedes language learning, as learners tend to sit silently or repeat mechanically after the teacher – without understanding. This, according to Benson, results in frustration and, eventually, problems for learners such as repetition, failure and even dropout.

The problems of submersion are worsened by “low levels of teacher education, poorly designed, inappropriate curricula and lack of adequate school facilities...particularly when the language of instruction is also foreign to the teacher” (Benson 2005: 2). Similar arguments against submersion have been advanced in Europe in the light of the influx of migrants who speak languages other than those spoken in their host countries (Lüdi, cited in Alexander 2006).

To demonstrate the importance of mother-tongue education in the context of South Africa, Alexander (2006) quotes Simkins and Patterson who, in their study on learner performance concluded:

...social and economic variables at the individual household level do not play an enormous role in determining performance, with the exception of the language variables. Pupils whose home language is an African language are at a considerable disadvantage in the language of instruction by the time they reach Grade 11 if the language of instruction is never spoken at home. This can be offset somewhat if the language of instruction is spoken sometimes at home and it can be offset considerably
if the language of instruction is spoken often at home. (Simkins & Patterson 2005, cited in Alexander 2006: 6)

By contrast, bilingual programmes allow for “systematic teaching of the second language” (Benson 2005). For Obanya (2004: 12),

Learning with the first language reinforces the language skills acquired in early childhood. Learning in it helps to ensure genuine learning by developing the higher cognitive and communication skills, while learning from it promotes feeling of belonging and self-confidence that goes with all-round acculturation.

Some inroads have been made, with some developing countries – South Africa included – beginning to adopt bilingual language policies. There are basically two models of bilingual teaching. The one model is *transitional bilingualism*, which means that learners start with the mother tongue as the language of learning, but change to a dominant language. Cases where transition occurs after fewer than four or five years are referred to as *early exit*, while cases where transition occurs after four years and more are referred to as *late exit* (Alexander 2006; Benson 2005). Early-exit transitional models are said to be weaker; for this reason, proponents of bilingualism argue for late exit.

The other model of bilingual teaching is *additive bilingualism*. This model entails,

adding a second language to competence in the first and building on the learner’s skills and knowledge in the first language while teaching the second language in an understandable way, with more positive academic and affective results. (Benson 2005: 15)

This kind of model has been known to work in Canada, where both first and second languages hold high status and parents encourage their children to be bilingual.

Successful bilingual education, however, is dependent on appropriate teacher training to equip teachers with the necessary skills as well as appropriate methodologies for bilingual teaching. Also of importance is the development of relevant language materials. According to Benson (2005), the development of materials for bilingual programmes requires the collaborative effort of linguists and teachers as well as members of the community.

Multigrade teaching literature identifies language as an important aspect in multigrade teaching, alongside others such as teacher development, curriculum reform and learning support materials (Juvane 2005).

Evidence in the current study shows that with the exception of Pietersburg, an Afrikaans-medium school, the LoLT of the remainder of the participating schools is Setswana in the Foundation Phase, and English from Grade 4 onwards. Although Setswana was adhered to as the LoLT in the Foundation Phase, English was often employed where there were no such words in Setswana, especially for explaining shapes in teaching Numeracy. The only other time we observed English being used was in the Foundation Phase, during English Literacy lessons. This practice is in line with what is prescribed in the LiEP. In this sense, these schools can be said to be practising what the literature regards as an early-exit transitional model of bilingualism (Alexander 2006; Benson 2005). The fact that learners and teachers were proficient in the same languages – Setswana at
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five of the schools, and Afrikaans at the sixth school – was supportive of teaching, not only of languages but also of other learning areas. The use of the mother tongue at these multigrade schools contrasts with what was found in research done in the Amazon and Andean regions of Peru, which are characterised by high cultural and linguistic diversity given the large indigenous rural populations. There, multigrade teachers are faced with the task of teaching a “mono-cultural and mono-lingual” Spanish curriculum to indigenous children, who, in many cases, are completely mono-cultural and mono-lingual (Little 1995, 2005).

That said, challenges were observed during the current research, particularly in the Setswana-speaking schools, where the LoLT had to change from Setswana to English in the Intermediate Phase:

- At Emang, Setswana was often employed to explain some English concepts to help learners better understand what was being taught as they sometimes struggled to understand English.
- In the Intermediate Phase Numeracy lesson, when working with Grade 6, the teacher at Keitumetse did revision exercises in English, clarified new concepts with translation in Setswana, and then reinforced what had been covered in the lesson exclusively in Setswana.
- The difficulties relating to English affected assessment practices at Lokang Primary School. The teacher pointed out that during exam time she reads each and every question aloud, translates it, and gives examples to the learners to facilitate understanding. Consequently, learners took longer than the stipulated time to complete their examinations and failed to complete tests, even with additional time. This in turn had a negative effect on their overall performance, which was often not a true reflection of their capabilities. The teacher pointed out that no solution had been devised for this, despite departmental officials’ awareness of the language challenges presented by the change in the LoLT to English in Grade 4.

These challenges may be as a result of early-exit transition to the dominant English at Grade 4, which perhaps has not given learners sufficient time to acquire skills in English as the second language. However, they could also point to problems of language teaching in the first three years. Indeed, the NCS review report pointed to practices by most provinces where English is only introduced at Grade 3 level, despite the proposal in the NCS to do so in Grade 1 (Ministry of Basic Education 2009). There is a need for research to look in depth into language teaching practices in multigrade settings. According to the literature, code-switching is effective in contexts where learners and teachers alike are proficient in both the languages used in teaching and learning; otherwise, teachers use these strategies as mechanisms for coping with a foreign language of teaching and learning (Benson 2005).

In the case of the schools we worked with, proficiency claims in English by teachers were sometimes doubtful. At Keitumetse, neither of the two teachers was particularly adept at English. It seemed as though English was rarely spoken, although we are sure that the requisite amount of time at school is allocated to English. Grades 5 and 6 learners had a better passive than active sense of English, and they had gained a certain proficiency in English from watching TV. The principal claimed that she encourages reading (there are good resources of reading materials from QIDS UP in the school), but she found the suggestion that she read to the class on a regular basis a rather surprising one. It seemed likely that the Grade 6 learners in this school would achieve a reasonable level of proficiency in Setswana and English by the end of the year but that levels are likely to be relative.

The current study indicated that learners in schools where a transition has to be made from mother tongue to English struggle with such transition. This finding applies not only to
multigrade schools; it is well known that monograde schools find themselves in a similar situation. Difficulties are worsened by the fact that teachers are not always proficient in English. As the literature points out, the second language needs to be taught systematically to enable learners to transfer skills from the first language (Benson 2005). Teacher training needs to look into equipping teachers for this systematic teaching of language, if the challenges relating to transition are to be addressed and teaching and learning are to be improved. In addition, the relevant materials need to be made available to support language teaching.

4.7 Assessment

The case studies suggest that the participating multigrade schools generally adopted continuous assessment with a variety of formal and informal assessment forms, including tests, assignments, classwork, homework, oral, research and demonstrations. This finding resonates with what the literature proposes for multigrade settings (Hargreaves 2001; Little 2005).

By the same token, the practices of the multigrade teachers involved in the current study contrast with what Berry (2007) found in his research in the Turks and Caicos Islands, where multigrade teachers were found to focus on summative assessment. As mentioned earlier, this finding can be attributed to the post-apartheid curriculum, which prescribed a move from summative to continuous/formative assessment. That said, teachers need to have an understanding of how to assess learners in multigrade classes; and, as the literature proposes, this is one of the areas in which multigrade teachers need to be trained.

The current study encountered variations in how teachers approached assessing the different grades in their classes. For example, the teacher at Emang stated that while the learning outcomes are the same, she differentiated between the grades in terms of assessment standards and activities. Our observations and study of workbooks confirmed the differentiated activities.

At Moeti, the principal stated that he prepared one assessment for the whole class for fear that “we would never finish the curriculum if we had to assess according to grades”. This statement appears to contradict his earlier assertion, however, that while he pitches his lessons at a certain level, he differentiates in terms of activities that he assigns to the different grades.

Among the three strategies that Hargreaves (2001) proposes for encouraging assessment for learning in the multigrade classroom, two relate to the involvement of learners while the third relates to using tasks with assessment potential. One of the strategies relating to learners is facilitating individual responsibility for learning, which involves informing learners of the criteria used in assessment and allowing them to discover ways of learning that work for them. The other is using other learners as assessment resources (Hargreaves 2001).

Despite the fact that other forms of assessment are suggested in the literature as well as prescribed by the South African curriculum policy, teachers’ assessment of learners’ work was the most dominant method of assessment at the six schools. However, instances of learner involvement in self, peer and group assessment were reported at Pietersburg and Emang.

Nevertheless, the teacher at Emang expressed reservations regarding learner self-assessment because some learners mark their answers right where they get them wrong. We did not see any learner self-assessment during our visits to the schools. There is a need to understand the reasons for teachers’ reluctance to involve learners in assessment, and to address them accordingly.
literature suggests that involvement of learners in assessment has the potential to legitimise assessment, in that learners are informed of the purpose of an assessment (Frederikson & Collins 1989, cited in Hargreaves 2001). Involvement also has the potential to improve learning in that learners can direct their own learning by reinforcing learning processes that help them achieve learning outcomes (Hargreaves 2001). Teachers may need assistance regarding how to make this possible. The starting point in this would be the need for teachers to recognise learners as both learning and assessment resources, as the literature suggests (Ames 2007; Hargreaves 2001).

According to Little (2005), regular and frequent formative assessment is a vital tool for teachers and learners alike in the multigrade setting. The current study found assessment to range from regular assessments to assessments that were less frequent:

- At Lokang, for example, a look at learners’ workbooks and scripts revealed that learners had only done one formal test for both Numeracy and Literacy. About two or three informal assignments had been carried out. Some of these activities had not been marked by the teacher. The teacher acknowledged that marking was one of her weaknesses and she was working on it. Another teacher at the same school pointed out that she just did not have enough time to conduct the assessments as regularly as required. Test scores and learner results were not readily available as proof of how much assessment had been carried out, or how the learners were progressing.
- Similarly, at Mathapelo, the multigrade class had only been given two tests for Language and Mathematics at the time of the visit, while the teacher had planned to have given four tests by this time.
- The principal of Emang said she was unable to achieve the school assessment goals set for her classes because of a demanding schedule. A teacher at the same school indicated that not all learners completed their homework, which she linked to parental negligence and lack of willingness to assist with homework and research activities. A similar problem was mentioned at Lokang.

Nevertheless, some positive practices were reported in terms of the schools providing support to learners who experience difficulties in their learning. This support took the following forms:

- Provision of extra lessons during breaks and/or after school (Mathapelo and Emang).
- Addressing academic problems picked up during the day in the afternoons during a study period at the hostel, since 85% of the learners live in the hostel (Pietersburg).
- Special intervention activities (Lokang).
- Involvement of parents to find solutions and/or assist their children with their school work (Lokang and Emang).

On the whole, the findings point to a general acceptance of formative assessment practices, and the support provided to learners experiencing learning difficulties points to commitment to assessment for learning, although none of this was observed during our visit.

However, the picture painted here also suggests difficulties faced by teachers in relation to learner assessment. Among these difficulties are time constraints, workload and lack of parental support. In fact, teachers have consistently raised concerns regarding the administrative requirements relating to assessment as it is advanced in both C2005 and the NCS (Ministry of Education 2000; 2009). Time constraints and workload are among those highlighted in the literature as challenges facing multigrade teachers (Little 2005; Joubert 2005; Titus 2004). Departmental requirements relating to the amount of assessment and recording need to be revisited. Teacher training and support should seek to reinforce assessment practices, as well as encourage adoption of
assessment practices that are suited to multigrade settings. How to assess learners in multigrade classes, involving learners in assessment (including how to train learners for this role), and how to deal with challenges teachers are facing are among the key issues that need attention. The fact that the curriculum framework is based on a continuous assessment model should serve to provide a facilitative environment for assessment-for-learning strategies. There is a need to find out from parents how they can assist their children with their school work.

4.8 Teacher education, development and support

In this sub-section we provide a survey of teachers’ formal qualifications and experience, their training in multigrade teaching, and the relationship between teachers’ professional qualifications, learner performance and teachers’ subject competence. We also discuss the support provided to deliver the curriculum. We draw on the actual observations and discussions we had with teachers and principals, in particular, for this purpose as well as discussions with teacher trainers. This review highlights the need to provide greater departmental assistance for multigrade teachers. Such support should go hand in hand with greater accountability on the part of teachers and schools.

4.8.1 Qualifications, teaching experience and training

Trained teachers have a better grasp of subject knowledge, pedagogy and classroom practices than untrained teachers (Darling-Hammond 2005). In addition, there is evidence that the generally poor perceptions of multigrade teachers about their work can be mitigated by the provision of better resources and better formal training (Mulryan-Kyne 2004; Lingam 2007). In the research conducted in the Eastern Cape Province, Brown (2009: 69) reported that teachers “felt unprepared to perform” in the following areas of need: pedagogy, curriculum adaptation and multigrade classroom management.

Evidence from the current study suggests variation regarding the qualifications of the teachers and the extent of their teaching experience at the six schools. Almost none of the teachers were under- or un-qualified in terms of the formal certification and training they had obtained. Several of them had more than the required minimum to teach at primary school level and a few were in the process of continuing their studies.

While these teachers may have good formal qualifications, none of them had received training in multigrade teaching and learning at tertiary institutions. The point was stressed repeatedly at all the schools we visited. The principal at Moeti said:

Although all multigrade teachers including myself in...[this] school and other schools around [here] have never been trained in the pedagogy of teaching multigrade classes, the multigrade teacher was coping quite well even if multigrade [teaching] is challenging.

The teacher shared the view of the principal. She referred to the strategies that helped her cope:

The most difficult aspect of teaching multigrade is to ensure that you prepare good exercises for chosen theme/s and for both grades, with the aim of achieving the LO [learning outcome], as well as to keep to the set plan for the year.
This teacher, like most of her colleagues at the other schools, expressed the desire for further training in multigrade teaching by the education department. She stated that the workshops run by the department did not address multigrade teaching. The principal and the teacher at Emang pointed out that the workshops for different grades were conducted concurrently, without taking into account that multigrade teachers were responsible for several grades for the whole day. At these departmental workshops multigrade teachers had to choose which sessions dealing with single grades and specific learning areas they would participate in, thereby missing out on the other, equally important sessions. In effect, according to one principal, teachers at her school tried to adapt what they had learned at the workshops on monograde teaching to see if it could be applied to the multigrade context. Another problem was that the schools had to be closed so that teachers could attend the workshops.

Interviews with teacher training institutions confirmed a neglect of multigrade teaching in teacher education programmes. Very few institutions are giving attention to multigrade issues. The Cape Peninsula University of Technology has been providing multigrade teaching programmes and is currently training multigrade teachers on behalf of the DBE. A few other institutions, such as the University of Venda and the University of KwaZulu-Natal, are beginning to look into the preparation of multigrade teachers. In particular, the University of Venda has started infusing multigrade issues into teacher training programmes, and including multigrade-specific questions in examination papers. However, more institutions need to look into the issue of training multigrade teachers. All training institutions must make multigrade teaching part of teacher training. There is a need to draw on the experiences of the institutions doing something in this area and come up with ways of ensuring that issues of multigrade education form part of IPET and CPTD.

The common problem faced by teachers in adapting a monograde curriculum to the multigrade classroom can be addressed. With reference to developing countries, Pridmore (2007: 559) describes “four empirical models of multigrade practice and examines the models of curriculum construction and child learning that inform them”. She presents a “five-step process that can be used by curriculum planners to adapt monograded curricula”. She also outlines a “strategy for implementing such a process by providing further support to strengthen curriculum units and improve teacher education”.

Most of those interviewed expressed the view that the programmes run by the education department and the provincial Institutional Curriculum Support (ICS) did not work well: “The ICS come and...[are] surprised at how we manage multigrade classes; they try to understand but they can’t because they...[do not have the] experience...” Visits to the schools by the subject advisors, also commonly known as Area Project Officers (APOs), were ad hoc and infrequent, typically taking place once a year:

The APO is available to provide support, but it is not multigrade support; she usually says: “You are the one who know[s] better about this multigrade; I do not know anything about it.” So I just share some of my ideas with her.

District officials, however, were of the view that there was some form of training targeted at multigrade teachers, although they could not provide details on this training apart from mentioning that it was curriculum support.

The absence of effective in-service training for multigrade teachers was seen as a result of neglect on the part of the authorities, rather than being due to the shortcomings of principals. As a result
of the lack of training available, teachers had to work harder and were required to have greater resourcefulness.

The literature on other countries emphasises that it is crucial that multigrade teachers are trained prior to taking on jobs as teachers, and that they continue to receive professional development during their careers. However, it is common for multigrade teaching to be excluded from teacher education programmes (Brown 2009; Little 1995). A common reason given for not training these teachers as part of pre-service training, is that there is a likelihood that such teachers will never teach in multigrade schools (Birch & Lally 1995). This argument ignores the extent of multigrade teaching in most countries. Teachers have, therefore, been trained in the traditional way and are prepared to teach in monograde classrooms and for homogeneity in terms of age, ability and so on. Teaching practice during the course of initial teacher training is usually undertaken in monograde situations. It is only in a few, exceptional countries that special pre- and in-service training curricula have been developed for multigrade teachers. Otherwise, preparation and support of multigrade teachers tends to be ad hoc (Joubert 2007; Juvane 2005).

As a result, multigrade teachers in South Africa and elsewhere are under-prepared for their roles and struggle with the conditions of work. The situation is further exacerbated by the fact that many of the multigrade schools are situated in remote areas. This results in multigrade teachers being isolated from useful interaction with educational authorities and with other teachers with whom they could exchange ideas (Joubert 2007; Juvane 2005; Birch & Lally 1995).

Birch and Lally (1995) list the skills multigrade teachers should acquire. They are:

- Curriculum adaptation.
- Development of learning materials to suit diverse learner needs simultaneously.
- Innovative pedagogical practices, linked to multigrade epistemologies.
- Ability to cope with assessment in multigrade contexts.
- Grounding in learning area knowledge and skills.
- Ability to cope with life in rural areas and to foster close ties with the wider school communities.
- Skills for managing diversity – not only in terms of learner characteristics but also in terms of curriculum processes in classes.

The above list from Birch and Lally (1995) provides pointers for what content to include in teacher education and development programmes in preparing teachers for multigrade teaching.

### 4.8.2 Qualifications, learner performance and subject competence

We found that teacher qualifications and experience influenced learner performance and the quality of teaching. This was the case, especially, at Pietersburg, where the teachers were well qualified and had mastered the subject content and where learners performed well academically. Both of the teachers at this school stated that they were pleased with learners’ academic progress. Our classroom observations and review of learners’ written work and academic results in tests confirmed this view. The principal at Pietersburg said that learners performed better than at most schools in the area. This was evident at the end of every year when all the grades were reviewed and analysed. This was largely due to the small classes, which meant learners were given individual attention. Because there were just over 30 learners in the school, the teachers knew all the learners well. They taught the same learners from one year to the next. The principal also thought that the learners at Pietersburg were more mature emotionally and socially by the time they left the school. They apparently adapted very well to high school.
The situation at Pietersburg differs from that of the black schools that participated in the research. Pietersburg is a middle class school situated in a rural area and the parents of the learners at this school form part of the local white farming community. The learners therefore come from homes that are better off than the homes of most black learners in the area. Their parents are literate in Afrikaans and probably English as well. The teachers at this school are the products of the Christian National Education – as opposed to Bantu Education – system. This means that, unlike several of their black colleagues in this study, they have subject competence and knowledge. Their lessons are thus well structured, with clearly set goals. Therefore, class, race, language and history work together with qualifications to provide better education at Pietersburg, and thus the learners are doing well.

As already noted, it was not always the case that factors such as good formal qualifications and teaching experience on the part of the teachers translated into good lessons or learner learning at the black schools. For example, looking at the exercises of learners at Moeti, we discovered that about 50% of the learners completed their assigned work with ease, while the other half struggled. Two Grade 3 learners had difficulties; not only were they unable to understand the lessons but they were also unable to complete their work. They were barely able to write anything that could be regarded as legible. The teacher commented that those particular learners had learning difficulties and wondered how they had been promoted to Grade 3, when they were not even able to do Grade 2 activities.

We also came across instances where, despite the formal qualifications, the teacher’s performance in the classroom was poor and there was clearly a need for more training in subject competence. A teacher discussing a poem with her class struggled with understanding what she was teaching. She asked the learners: “What was the name of that lad? I will give you a clue...it is written at the bottom of the poem...He is eight years old.” This was inaccurate as there is no mention of the name of the boy in the poem. The name to which the teacher was referring the learners was the name of the poet.

Further, the work of learners that was presented by the teacher as being good was in fact poor. Learners’ compositions showed that they had difficulty in writing sentences that had any comprehensible meaning. At this particular school, records for the multigrade class showed that the average pass rate for learners in Numeracy and Mathematics was 17.5% for learners in Grade 5 and 11.7% for learners in Grade 6. The average percentage pass rate for English and Literacy was 32% for Grade 5 and 34.5% for Grade 6. This teacher had not kept any learner records until the last day of our visit, when she worked on and presented these figures. And yet, the pass rate at the school tended to be almost 100%, except in 2006 when it was 30.8%. When questioned about this difference, the teacher said that some learners were just promoted to the next grade because of their age and because they had been in one grade for more than a year.

While there are many similarities with regard to the position of multigrade teaching in South Africa and other developing countries, the case studies in the North West Province highlight two issues that have been neglected in the research literature. Firstly, there is a need to improve teachers’ knowledge of the subjects they teach. As we have pointed out, while teachers may have good formal qualifications, these do not necessarily translate into, for example, good poetry lessons and good learner grades that reflect the quality of teaching and learning. In most developing countries, multigrade teachers tend to be un-qualified and under-qualified. Secondly, support, and accountability to the education department and to communities, should go hand in hand. The writing on multigrade teaching concentrates on the former and tends to neglect the latter. Schools and teachers, government and communities should set up the appropriate
structures, or strengthen and consolidate those that already exist, to both support education and demand accountability from teachers in rural areas especially. (See also sub-section 4.8.4 below.)

4.8.3 Supporting teachers inside schools, and capacity building

Earlier in the report we discussed teacher support, mainly from the perspective of their training in multigrade classrooms and from outside the school, with regard to the programmes provided by the DoE. In this section we examine what support teachers can expect from principals and colleagues.

The work of Michael Fullan (2006) is instructive in framing our discussion. He discusses what he calls “knowledge theory” as a “force for school improvement”. It consists of several premises. These include issues such as changing existing cultures and cementing ties among school, community, district and state. The question of capacity building is directly relevant to our discussion, below, about the conditions in the North West. Multigrade schools need administrative support to ensure that principals do not have to complete secretarial and management work and teach as well. Principals also need training on how to provide teachers with curriculum support, and they need adequate resources to support this. The idea of capacity building should include and consolidate the experiential knowledge that principals and teachers bring to their work, as well as the local knowledge that communities possess. In this regard, Fullan talks about the importance of “reflective action” in improving schools.

The current study found a need for teaching and learning materials that cater specifically for multigrade teaching. At Emang there was no programme of internal support for teachers. There were only four teachers at the school and the principal was, in effect, the only member of the school management team. Her administrative and teaching responsibilities meant that she had no time to provide special support to her colleagues. Other principals made similar statements.

The Foundation Phase teacher at Keitumetse said that the only support she received came from the principal. The principal pointed out that, in effect, multigrade teaching at her school was the product of reflective practice only – that is, not theory, training at tertiary institutions, in-service training or departmental support.

The situation in this regard was particularly bad at Lokang. When the teacher was appointed she did not know that she would be teaching multigrade classes. “I didn’t know anything about multigrade classes. I just applied for the post.” She had to rely on the principal to assist her. The principal said that to some degree she was working in the dark and did not know whether the strategies and approaches she was passing on were effective or not. A possible solution, she said, was in CPTD with a dedicated focus on multigrade teaching.

At Keitumetse the guidance and advice provided by the principal, the only resource teachers could rely on, was not always the best. The isolation of the school community did not result in the best teaching strategies always being carried out.

At Pietersburg the principal provided little hands-on support, apart from overall oversight, but this did not seem to matter as the teachers worked well on their own.

The principal at Moeti said that the only support he was able to provide was encouragement and attempting to see to it that teaching and learning resources were available. This, admittedly, did not amount to much. Teachers relied on one another when difficulties arose.
Phase teacher said that this was her second month of teaching at the school and she was still trying to find her feet. She could say little about the support she received. Unlike at Emang, where collaborative planning was said not to work, the multigrade teacher at Moeti found the weekly meetings of Foundation Phase teachers helpful in planning lessons. The Grade R teacher at this school, who was not as qualified as the other teachers, also benefited from these discussions. There was also some contact with other multigrade and monograde schools, which were visited at least once a quarter. These visits provided moral support. The principal told the researchers that he had established that, in fact, his Grade 6 learners’ academic performance in external examinations was lower than at monograde schools. The Foundation Phase teacher said that the performance of learners from multigrade schools would remain mediocre as long as the education department did not support multigrade teaching adequately. He also said that more tangible support had come in the form of the appointment of an additional teacher and an administrative assistant. Despite the fact that the school’s size meant that it was entitled to only three teachers, the department had permitted a total of five teachers to be employed. This meant that the school had been able to avoid clustering Grades R and 1.

4.8.4 Support and accountability

When the researchers arrived at Moeti early on one of the days, they found a class that was unattended for almost half the morning. They had been asked to arrive at the school for lesson observations “about two hours or so later than the time we start classes”. The researchers gained the impression that the teachers had felt pressured to provide year and term plans and that they had spent the morning developing and putting together these documents. We came across instances where the absence of lesson planning led to teachers giving confusing instructions to learners and where it appeared that instructions to complete exercises were ignored by the teacher and not followed through.

Issues such as classes left unattended and the absence of lesson plans and assessment records should be viewed in a wider context related to the concern that public schools are not serving the nation. Poor school-leaving examination results, in which about 40% of the candidates have failed in recent years, have highlighted the problem. In June 2011 the Annual National Assessment grades indicated that only 35% of Grade 3 learners could read and write at an appropriate level for their age group. Similarly, the Numeracy results were 28% (DBE 2011a). A typical response has been that schools and teachers are to blame because they are not doing their work. They must be held accountable. Such calls have also been made in countries such as Britain and the United States. In these countries standardised tests and other achievement goals have become crucial in making judgements about the success or failure of schools and teachers. Hargreaves (2003) makes the point that in the knowledge society of today, highly skilled knowledge professionals are required in schools. School leaders and teachers should be treated by policymakers in a way that recognises the need for the type of creative, innovative learners that are now required in developed and complex modern societies. Focusing narrowly on high-stakes testing and making this the primary goal of education will not lead to the attainment of this objective. In South Africa these low scores have served to confirm the historical and racial legacies of apartheid.

In 2003 the South African government introduced the Integrated Quality Management System (IQMS), and in 2008 the Performance Management and Development System (PMDS) was introduced. However, the way in which these systems have been implemented in schools has been problematic and whether they have contributed to the attainment of better and higher quality education is debatable. Moreover, in South Africa (and the United States and Britain),
In the context of multigrade teaching the important principle is that greater departmental support should go hand in hand with greater accountability of teachers and schools, not only with the local structures of the DBE but also with school governing bodies, parents and local communities. Government should, in the main, meet its responsibilities in providing the framework and policy environment for quality education in rural areas and facilitate the ability of schools and teachers to meet their responsibilities to learners and communities.

4.9 Attitudes towards multigrade schools

The literature suggests that multigrade teachers in developing countries generally hold negative attitudes towards multigrade teaching (Little 2005; Joubert 2005; Titus 2004; Berry, cited in Little 2005; Suzuki 2004; Vithanapathirana 2006; Collingwood 1991). In a study of teachers in the Nuwakot and Kavre districts of Nepal, 50 out of 56 teachers with experience of multigrade teaching thought that multigrade teaching presented them with more difficulties than monograde teaching (Suzuki 2004). Little (2005) found that in the Peruvian Amazon, multigrade teachers perceived the monograde class as the desirable norm, and the multigrade as the “second class” necessity. The literature also points out that teachers feel unprepared to work in multigrade classrooms, judge that children do not ‘get the same’ as in monograde classrooms, and report that they have insufficient educational materials to support learning in the multigrade classroom (Little 2005). However, an action research study undertaken in Sri Lanka saw a change among multigrade teachers from what was generally a negative to a more positive attitude. This could be attributed, in the main, to a realisation that there are strategies that can be used to improve learner achievement outcomes and lessen the teacher’s burden of intensive lesson planning for several grades (Vithanapathirana 2006).

Evidence from the current study revealed that, as in other developing contexts, the attitudes of multigrade teachers tended to be negative. They expressed reservations, frustrations and fears regarding multigrade teaching. Some teachers reasoned that multigrade teaching needed to be eliminated. For example, at Emang both the principal and the teacher stated that multigrade teaching was undesirable, and they eagerly anticipated a merger with a school in a neighbouring village. A former circuit manager responsible for the school (now retired) had indicated that the school could be merged, although this in turn was largely dependent on the PED’s ability to provide transport. No progress had been made and the circuit manager had retired.

Appointment of additional teachers was suggested at Lokang and Keitumetse as another way out of the multigrade teaching arrangement. As a teacher at Lokang commented:

For nna multigrade yalapisa! Okare baka hira matitshere a mangata, itswe [for me multigrade is tiring! If only they could hire more teachers and get it over and done with]. Multigrade is not working because other children remain behind; they just copy others because they are many in the class.

The principal of Keitumetse felt that if multigrade teaching was to be retained, a different model for allocating posts should be used to accommodate the school’s and the learners’ needs. For example, her school has two teachers who have to deal with learners across seven grades. The
principal sees the employment of an additional teacher at her school as part of the solution. This would reduce the burden on teachers teaching four different grades in one class and three in the other.

These suggestions by teachers imply that they sometimes see monograde teaching as a better option compared to the ‘second class’ multigrade teaching. Various reasons are provided for the negative attitudes towards multigrade teaching. The first reason provided is that of workload. According to the principal of Keitumetse, although the number of learners in their classes is small, the tasks are multifarious and can be onerous because of the number of grades and their respective curriculum requirements. As a principal who also teaches, she finds herself overstretched.

Similarly, teachers at Mathapelo complained about administrative overload due to the need to draw up lesson plans and work schedules for multiple grades and having to mark exercises for several grades. In addition to heavy teaching loads, there was pressure to attend departmental workshops. For them, the workload was exacerbated by the lack of support from the PED. The teachers and principal found it very difficult to handle the demanding curricula across different grades in the allocated time. This reason echoes what Berry (cited in Little 2005) found in the Turks and Caicos Islands, where multigrade teachers held negative attitudes towards the burdensome nature of lesson planning in the multigrade classroom.

A further reason for negative attitudes towards multigrade teaching, revealed by the case studies in the current research, is that multigrade teaching is time-consuming, which prevents teachers from covering the curriculum, and this in turn affects the quality of teaching. This view was raised by the principal of Keitumetse, who had been teaching at this school for 10 years. Her view was that the multigrade context does not provide adequate time to cover the curriculum and to address the different needs of learners.

Time constraints were also raised as an issue at Emang. For the principal, continuation of multigrade teaching can only be to the detriment of the learners. The teacher pointed out:

> In a multigrade situation, it is difficult to make follow-ups with learners. Sometimes I take [it] grade by grade. I do not stick to the time allocation. Learners do not get what they deserve...Learners do not gain as much as they are supposed to. Multigrade teaching is not good for learners. I would not recommend it as pedagogy.

Reiterating the point about the time-consuming nature of multigrade teaching, the principal at Emang explained that,

> The school is in a situation where there are two classes in the same space and at the same time. Two classes use the same time slot of 30 minutes. The teacher ends up giving one class more attention than the other as they are not in the same grade and are, therefore, not equally equipped to deal with the subject at hand. The one class will take longer to finish assignments and tests and will require more attention than the other, but this becomes a problem as this might mean that you neglect the other learners in different grades.

Similarly, for Mathapelo time was a major concern.
This explanation for negative attitudes towards multigrade teaching resonates with the literature in that, for example, Collingwood (1991) found that teachers complained about the reduction in instructional time in multigrade settings. As in the observations by Little (2005), teachers in the current study were of the view that their learners were not gaining as much as their monograde counterparts, given that there was not enough time to cover the curriculum. These issues need to be given attention if multigrade teaching is to be effective.

A further explanation provided by teachers for negative attitudes towards multigrade teaching was that it is strenuous and drains “our energy as teachers”. This point was raised by a teacher at Emang. For her, multigrade teaching had impacted negatively on her private life and health. She had neglected the social aspect of her life and she reported high levels of stress, symptomatic through headaches and swollen lips. The teacher feared for her life since one of the multigrade teachers at the school had reportedly died of stress, induced by frustrations associated with the job. She cautioned: “We are going to lose a lot of teachers because of multigrade teaching.”

Despite these challenges, some benefits of multigrade teaching were found. For example, the principal and one of the teachers at Mathapelo seemed to have a positive attitude. The principal acknowledged that multigrade teaching provided one, as a teacher and an administrator, with a unique set of skills to handle difficult situations. This finding points to the professional development potential of working in multigrade settings.

According to the Emang principal, although multigrade teaching was replete with challenges and was a problem for learners and teachers, it provided an opportunity for peer learning. For the principal, peer learning was inspirational and fostered a greater degree of learner participation and a spirit of sharing. It also built learners’ confidence and encouraged self-expression and inquisitiveness.

Similar sentiments were expressed by one of the provincial officials, who stated:

I think it [multigrade teaching] opens up some exciting opportunities, from a pedagogical perspective. It does. For me it also talks to your policy on inclusion...it talks about flexibility. I think it does open up those opportunities if we do it right, if we empower people as much as we can. It talks to a whole range of things; you also have multiculturalism, which is a phenomenon that is with us...For us, multigrade is a problem now simply because we don’t have the resources but we don’t even see it as an opportunity in terms of how learners from different grades can interact and so forth. But I think it is something worth looking into and it does open up those exciting possibilities, that’s on the one hand. On the other hand, unless we do something about it, it can turn out to be something else, a monster that we cannot handle if we don’t really empower and focus on it and come up with whatever strategies to make it work.

At Moeti, the teachers displayed a love for and a commitment to their vocation. The interaction with learners in class suggested a high level of commitment and dedication to the learners and teaching practice. However, a plea for assistance was made by one of the teachers, who pointed to the need to recognise the difficult circumstances in which teaching was conducted. She said: “The department knows about the difficulties of teaching multigrade but they still expect our school to deliver like single-grade schools.” She expressed appreciation for the researchers’ call to their school and hoped that the research findings would give voice to their concerns and encourage the PED to explore solutions to the problems they were experiencing. An increase in
salary would be welcomed because multigrade teachers, according to her, work harder than their peers in monograde settings.

This discussion points to the generally negative views held by multigrade teachers about multigrade teaching – views that are attributed to the burdensome planning, reduced time to cover the curriculum and perceived poor quality of the education that their learners receive because of the multigrade arrangement. It is crucial, therefore, that training and support of multigrade teachers look into the workloads of teachers in relation to the requirements for planning. This should be in addition to providing teachers with strategies for handling planning for classroom and learner organisation, and for teaching in multigrade classes.
As stated in the Introduction to this report, the aim of this study was to understand teaching practices, as well as their effectiveness in the acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills in multigrade classes at South African rural and farm schools. It also sought to understand the opportunities presented to and the challenges faced by multigrade teachers. This section synthesises the findings of the study. The synthesis is framed by themes corresponding to the research questions.

5. Synthesis of the findings

5.1 Extent of multigrade education in the South African education system

The quantitative analysis of EMIS data found that 27% of all 24 699 public schools in the South African education system are multigrade or have multigrade classes. This percentage is close to the international average, at 30% of all primary schools. While some of these schools are located in urban areas, the phenomenon is more prevalent in rural and farm areas.

The following provinces have a higher number of multigrade schools: Limpopo (1 649), Eastern Cape (1 524), and Kwazulu-Natal (1 167). These provinces are significantly rural, with extreme pockets of poverty, and agricultural activity being the source of income for a significant proportion of the population. There has been a decline in the number of multigrade schools in the Free State and Mpumalanga over the past five years, possibly due to the amalgamation and closure of small schools and the relocation of people from farming communities to urban areas.

Multigrade schools cater for 47 044 (0.4%) of the learners in the public schooling system, taught by 7% of the teachers in the system. Although multigrade education affects a small percentage of learners – yet in a significant percentage of the schools in the system – its importance transcends its size, for a number of reasons.

The most obvious reason is that the majority of the cohort of children affected by multigrade provision are from the most neglected and disadvantaged members of our society, both historically and currently. The provision of good quality education to these children and the communities from which they come is a political, economic and moral imperative. It speaks to the quality of our human rights regime, our democratic ambitions and the possibilities for useful economic opportunities for the majority of our citizens. It requires, therefore, a commitment to the ideal of ensuring that these rights are available to the most marginalised members of our society.

Equally important is the opportunity multigrade teaching provides for developing the potential of a systemic intervention, through which the needs of communities and their schools are met in the context of rural life and its demanding conditions. Put simply, multigrade teaching presents
real possibilities and has the potential to provide innovative approaches to the needs of learners in rural poor communities, but this requires political insight and determination. Multigrade education has the potential to provide extremely useful lessons about how to resolve some of the most intractable challenges facing education in developing societies and countries, transcending national boundaries, because it is likely to persist for a long time.

Small schools should be assessed by the contribution they make to the local community. Any merging or closing of small schools must be made with the relevant stakeholders. Quantitative data about the size and shape of multigrade teaching can be used to cost teacher development, learning materials and so on.

### 5.2 Teaching practices of multigrade teachers

#### 5.2.1 Curriculum adaptation

Literature on multigrade education suggests that national curricula require adaptation for them to be implemented effectively in multigrade settings. Our research found that there was no official/formal curriculum adaptation for multigrade schools. Instead, multigrade teachers were left to their own devices owing to the lack of expertise within the PED to provide support to multigrade teachers. The literature advises that curriculum adaptation must be the joint responsibility of teachers working with teacher trainers and/or curriculum specialists, and needs to be validated by education departments.

Although teachers reported no adaptation of the curriculum, their teaching practices reflected some of the adaptation strategies highlighted in the literature; in particular, the use of a differentiated and ‘quasi’ monograde adaptation strategy. Teachers’ experiences and expertise in this regard could be drawn on when undertaking curriculum adaptation.

#### 5.2.2 Lesson plans

Lesson plans are blueprints for how the teacher intends to handle a lesson. In a multigrade lesson, a lesson plan is all the more important given the need for the teacher to be clear on how s/he would handle the different grades.

What the current study found is that where teachers did prepare lessons plans, they approached the task either individually or as a group. The latter approach was facilitated by the actual number of teachers at the school; for example, it worked where there was more than one teacher in one phase.

However, a key concern is that despite the importance of work plans, not all teachers could produce lesson plans when researchers requested them. Some prepared lesson plans specifically for the researchers. As noted earlier in the report, in one case a principal pointed out that it was almost impossible for him to plan for his Grades 6 and 7 as that would mean planning 14 lessons for any given day, in addition to administrative responsibilities. This demonstrates the difficulties faced by principals of multigrade schools, who have to divide their time between teaching and administrative responsibilities.

Support for multigrade schools needs to look not only at supporting teachers, but also at assisting principals in the management of multigrade schools. Further, in addition to support in
the development of lesson plans, there is a need to ensure accountability of teachers in relation to curriculum planning.

5.2.3 Learner organisational strategies

How the classroom and learners are organised is crucial for effective multigrade teaching. It is linked to theories on how learners learn. Emphasis is given, in the literature, to the need for multigrade teachers to be flexible and to employ a variety of learner organisational strategies in order to facilitate both independent and cooperative learning among learners (Lingam 2007; Little 2005). The current study revealed a wide acceptance and use of groups by multigrade teachers, although there were still practices that resembled old ways of organising learners, particularly in rows. This finding relating to acceptance of groups can be attributed to the post-apartheid curriculum reform, which embraced principles of constructivism and cooperative learning. In terms of grouping, teacher practices in this regard pointed to the dominance of within-grade groups, and minimal use of cross-grade groups.

Of concern, however, is that grouping strategies were used largely as seating arrangements rather than as a cooperative learning arrangement. The idea behind grouping of learners is that learners could draw on one another as resources, but very little group learning was observed. Some of the teachers do not appear to have theoretical understanding of why they use groups, and there is a need for teacher training and support to look into this issue. This is also important given that very little variation was found in learner organisational strategies adopted by individual teachers. In the absence of training on how to organise learners for multigrade teaching, teachers appear to go with strategies that are familiar to them, which may be narrow and restrictive.

5.2.4 Teaching strategies

Together with learner organisational strategies, teaching strategies are crucial for effective teaching and learning. The literature on multigrade teaching stresses the importance of teachers employing various strategies in their classrooms. The research confirms the dominance of ‘quasi’ monograde teaching, where a teacher teaches each grade at a time (Veenman 1995). While this strategy has the potential for addressing grade-specific learning outcomes, the literature suggests that it is time-consuming and onerous. Teachers in the current study raised similar concerns.

However, the current research also points to some practices that combined whole-class teaching and differentiation in terms of activities. Such strategies can resolve the issue of time, while simultaneously ensuring that learners learn grade-specific content. As was the case with learner organisational strategies, when it came to teaching strategies teachers in the current study tended to stick to the ‘tried and tested’ ones rather than exploring others. Exposure to other teaching strategies, and how they can be used and for what purpose, would be useful for teachers. However, it must be borne in mind that teaching strategies should be determined by the subject, topic and/or activity to be tackled.

5.2.5 Learning and teaching support materials

Learning materials are part and parcel of the curriculum. Literature on multigrade teaching suggests that learning materials need to be in adequate supply, be of relevance and high quality, and be developed specifically for multigrade learning.
The current study found that while some schools had an adequate supply of materials, others did not. In addition to not having sufficient materials, schools serving previously disadvantaged black learners did not have materials in the relevant LoLT – Setswana in this case. Lack of materials in the relevant language also affected those schools that reported having sufficient materials; for example, one of the schools had sufficient materials, but all of these were in English, necessitating translation.

This finding points to a general neglect of support for African-language teaching in South African schools. While the LiEP embraces the use of first languages of learners in teaching and learning, this has not been accompanied by an investment in the development of materials to support teaching in African languages, and the training of teachers. Translation can be cumbersome and increases the workloads of multigrade teachers, whose workload is already high as a result of the multifarious nature of their work.

In addition, there is an absence of learning materials that support multigrade teaching. Existing materials consist mainly of textbooks aimed at supporting monograde, teacher-centred teaching and learning. Multigrade teaching requires more self-instructional and self-study learning materials than monograde teaching. Availability of such materials enables the teacher to work with some learners while others are engaging in individual or group tasks. Multigrade teaching provides greater opportunities for teachers to teach thematically, across different grades in the same class.

An understanding of the philosophies of teaching and learning is crucial in developing learning materials. Much of outcomes-based education is based on constructivist approaches to teaching and learning. This places emphasis on individual and social experience and argues that knowledge is rooted in the development of shared meanings and problem-solving. Learner-centredness has thus been emphasised. Multigrade teaching is conducive to and facilitates learner-centredness. One implication is that the curriculum and learning materials should, in terms of language, content and pedagogy, be socially and politically relevant and facilitate debate. The new materials should speak to local community circumstances and events, and also introduce learners to the wider world – nationally, regionally and internationally.

5.2.6 Language of learning and teaching

Language, given its communicative value, is fundamental to learning. Literature on language suggests that it is crucial for learners to be taught in the language familiar to them – their first language. However, South Africa, like many developing countries, finds itself in a situation where a foreign language, English in this case, dominates education interactions. This is despite a move towards bilingual language policies.

The current study found two dominant models in terms of language practices. One model was a case of one school where the first language (Afrikaans) of learners was used as a language of learning throughout, with the second language (English) taught as a subject. The other model was a case of five schools where the first language (Setswana) of learners was used as the language of learning in the Foundation Phase, but was changed to English at Grade 4. The current study shows that transition to English in Grade 4 presents difficulties for learners, resulting in teachers having to adopt code-switching. In one extreme case, teachers had to resort to translating examination questions to help learners understand what they were required to do during their examinations. The fact that teachers themselves are not all proficient in English does
not help the situation. Thus, historical patterns of advantage and disadvantage are perpetuated and compounded by the failure to implement meaningful approaches to language teaching.

As a matter of priority, attention needs to be given to improving language teaching and learning in these schools. The fact that appropriate materials are not always available in African languages militates against effective teaching and learning.

5.2.7 Assessment

The research suggests that multigrade teachers use formative assessment and that they apply various assessment forms including tests, assignments, classwork, homework, oral, research and demonstration. This practice is in line with the South African national assessment policy, which has moved away from the apartheid-era assessment policy, which was based on summative assessment. The literature suggests that formative assessment is more consistent with multigrade teaching, in that it is assessment aimed at better learning, as opposed to assessment used to determine promotion from one grade to another.

However, the current study found reluctance among teachers to involve learners in assessment. According to Hargreaves (2001), involvement of learners in their assessment process has the potential of exposing them to the criteria used in assessing their learning, thereby legitimising assessment as well as helping learners direct their own learning by reinforcing learning processes that work.

Also of concern is the irregularity of assessment, incidences of unmarked learners’ work and poor recording of assessments in some of the schools. Among the reasons given for this were workload and time constraints as well as the burdensome nature of recording grades.

Requirements relating to the amount of assessment and recording need to be revisited. It is hoped that the recent curriculum review (Ministry of Basic Education 2009) would have partly addressed the issue. However, there is a need to look at these issues in the context of multigrade teaching. Once this is done, teachers must also be held accountable.

Teacher in-service training should seek to reinforce assessment practices as well as encourage adoption of assessment practices that are compatible with multigrade teaching. There is also a need for the DBE to provide personnel in the form of administrative assistants, in addition to looking into providing a basic minimum of teachers for each multigrade school.

5.3 Effectiveness of teaching practices in the acquisition of literacy and numeracy

In the case of this study, effectiveness was looked at in terms of participation in class and pass rates. In terms of participation, the study showed that learners at some schools appeared to be learning. Samples of learner writing showed that some of the learners were acquiring some skills in relation to literacy and numeracy.

There were examples of learners participating in class. At Pietersburg, for example, learners in the Grades 6 and 7 class appeared to understand what they were taught and asked questions during the lesson.
However, there were also cases of learners struggling to learn. For example, at Lokang, the teacher used a question and answer method, and learners in the Grades 5 and 6 class participated minimally. They did not appear to understand the teacher.

It needs to be understood that effectiveness of teaching and learning is not only dependent on teacher practices; it also depends on other issues being attended to, like context, availability of resources, language and teacher training.

In terms of learner performance, the quantitative analysis pointed to high pass and promotion rates. However, these findings should be treated with caution. The recent data collected by the DBE, and widely reported in the media, highlight the poor literacy and numeracy levels of South African learners.

Generally, international studies comparing performance in multigrade and monograde schools have been inconclusive (Brown 2008). However, they have pointed to the effects of multigrade teaching on non-cognitive outcomes such as friendships among learners, the social and psychological development of learners and their attitudes towards school and education; with learners in multigrade classes found to perform better than those in monograde classes in these areas. We know very little about the non-cognitive performance of learners in multigrade schools and the impact of the different variables – inter alia, grouping, school size, learner ability and socio-economic status – in South Africa.

5.4 Challenges and opportunities presented by multigrade education

The literature suggests that multigrade teachers face more challenges than their counterparts in monograde classes. The current research found that multigrade teachers faced a number of challenges relating to workload linked to planning. Unlike monograde teachers, multigrade teachers have to plan for more than one grade. This is rooted in the fact that planning requirements are grade-specific for monograde and multigrade schools alike. This is onerous for multigrade teachers and planning requirements need to be reviewed for multigrade contexts.

Another challenge is reduced teaching time, given that teachers have to share the available time among the grades for which they are responsible. This affects multigrade teachers’ ability to cover the curriculum; as a result, learners do not receive quality education.

Also of concern is the lack of support and training for multigrade teachers, from planning to assessment. These challenges affect the attitudes of teachers towards multigrade teaching. As the current study revealed, some of these teachers, because of these challenges, would rather be teaching in a monograde school.

The many challenges relating to multigrade teaching meant that for the most part teachers were unable to see the possibilities and opportunities multigrade education presents. One teacher, for example, pointed out that there were no opportunities – only challenges. The only opportunities pointed to were those of peer tutoring and that of multigrade teaching as a professional development site – that it provides principals with an opportunity to develop a set of skills to handle difficult situations.
5.5 Teacher education, development and support

The literature stresses the need for multigrade teachers to be trained in specific aspects of multigrade education prior to taking their jobs, and requires that they continue to receive professional training throughout their careers. The current research, however, found that teachers were not trained in multigrade education, even though they had the requisite formal qualifications with respect to monograde education. In this respect, our research contradicts the international pattern that suggests that multigrade teachers tend to be poorly qualified.

In addition, district support for multigrade teachers is not multigrade specific because district officials themselves do not fully comprehend the challenges of, and have not had any training in, multigrade teaching. Principals, who are supposed to be teaching as well, also do not have the academic wherewithal for supporting multigrade teachers. Even teacher development workshops are geared towards monograde schools and do not take into account the existence and special circumstances of multigrade schools. The spatial isolation of multigrade teachers means that there is little interaction with teachers in other schools.

Interviews with universities revealed that preparing teachers for multigrade teaching has been neglected in teacher education and development programmes. It is only recently that some universities are beginning, in collaboration with the DBE, to train practising multigrade teachers. However, this is on a small scale and more attention needs to be given to training teachers for such contexts.

Lack of specific training and support has a bearing on teaching practices. Challenges faced by multigrade teachers could be avoided with provision of specific multigrade training and support. District officials should also be trained, especially with regard to the support they can provide the teachers in these schools.
6. Conclusion and recommendations

What this research has pointed to is the general neglect of multigrade education in South Africa. Conditions at national, provincial and school levels are generally not supportive of multigrade education. Continued neglect of the multigrade question constitutes a furtherance of the marginalisation of the poor and voiceless in our society, for whom multigrade education is a reality. Such treatment of the multigrade issue is antithetical to social justice and to the country’s transformation agenda. The case of multigrade education points to the need for flexibility in how education departments deal with schools that are differently situated from the norm.

We acknowledge and commend the DBE for the recent efforts in terms of ensuring that multigrade education issues are taken into account in policies and strategies, including the planned training of multigrade teachers. That said, we are entirely convinced that this issue requires more attention than it is currently afforded. Such attention would only be made possible by adopting a deliberate and comprehensive strategy on multigrade education, which is linked both to rural development and to the broader national development agenda as well as to the broader social context. Therefore, we recommend that a multigrade education policy framework be developed. This should draw on the wealth of experience and expertise that multigrade teachers possess, as well as the knowledge of teacher trainers and researchers who have done work in this area. Such a framework should also be accompanied by a plan of action. The policy and the plan of action should pay special attention to adapting the curriculum to the special needs of multigrade education. This would also entail the development of relevant teaching and learning materials; teacher education, development and support; and resourcing of schools.

Linked to this, we propose the reinstatement of the Rural Education Directorate within the DBE as a permanent unit. Within such a directorate there should be a Division for Multigrade Education, whose immediate tasks could include: a) developing policy for multigrade education and aligning that policy with existing education policies, b) developing a plan of action for support, and c) collecting data that could be used by officials for specific plans that support multigrade education. These tasks would need to be monitored and evaluated.

In addition to the broad proposals, the following more specific proposals are made:

- Policy development in multigrade teaching should take into account the location of the schools. Conditions in urban multigrade schools differ from those in isolated, rural areas.
- Education policy planners should collect and use quantitative and qualitative data that are regularly updated, to monitor trends. These data could be used to establish the cost of special learning materials, teacher training and use of technology in these schools. They could also be used to better understand and track learner academic performance.
- The DBE, Department of Higher Education and Training and teacher training institutions should work together to revise teacher training in the initial teacher education phase and during in-
service training programmes, so that they include courses that deal with the philosophies, curricula, practices and pedagogies of multigrade teaching. Training programmes should seek to prepare prospective teachers for the different contexts and types of schools: for example, monograde/multigrade, rural/urban/township and so forth, as well as the pedagogical implications of teaching in such contexts.

- IPET, ICS and curriculum workshops should include topics related to multigrade teaching and learning and to enhancing teacher subject competence. These programmes should be aligned with support at both school and departmental levels. Regular follow-up work should be conducted by subject advisors and APOs.

- Teacher training institutions should require student teachers to complete a teaching practice stint in multigrade schools.

- Enhanced departmental support at schools should be accompanied by greater teacher accountability in areas such as lesson planning, teaching, grading learners’ work and continuous assessment. Schools and teachers should also be accountable and report to parents and local communities.

- District officials supporting the schools need to be introduced to best practices in multigrade schools and classes.

- There is a need for raising awareness on multigrade teaching across all levels of the system.

- There is a need to strengthen language teaching in schools. This requires efforts on various fronts, including strengthening the training of teachers to help them teach first languages and additional languages systematically. Providing learning materials in relevant languages and supporting teachers with interpretation and implementation of language policy are also necessary. Proposals by the Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa for a late-exit transition from first language should be seriously engaged with.

- Learning materials should complement the pedagogies and teaching strategies, the assessment methods and the learner organisational strategies of multigrade teaching.

- Special incentives, such as increasing the remuneration of teachers working in isolated multigrade schools, should be implemented to recruit and retain teachers in this sector and to increase the number of teachers at schools that are currently understaffed.

- The education department needs to provide facilities basic to the functioning of schools; for example, safe toilets and (spacious) classrooms, and staff accommodation, among others.

- Merging and closing small schools should be evaluated against the overall goal of enhancing rural development and improving the quality of local education. The processes by which such decisions are made should include all the relevant stakeholders.
References


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