

Teaching reading in a multi-grade class: Teachers' adaptive skills and teacher agency in teaching across grade R and grade 1

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The skill of reading is regarded as the cornerstone of literacy learning in the foundation phase. Although it is the most complex skill to master, it forms part of literacy teaching. Most learners begin schooling without having any kind of exposure to reading. This lack of exposure introduces a number of challenges, which are consequently exacerbated if teachers have to teach in multi-grade classes. This case study was conducted in two primary schools in the Ndwedwe Circuit in KwaZulu-Natal. It is framed within the interpretive epistemology embedded in a qualitative research methodology. Empirical data were generated from two rural schools where multi-grade teaching was undertaken. To produce data, two teachers teaching multi-grade classes (incorporating both grade R and grade 1) were observed during an isiZulu Home Language reading period. Subsequently, semi-structured interviews were used to elicit more data for corroboration of findings. The findings show that teacher agency is crucial in making adaptive decisions. These decisions are based on the intersection of formal knowledge, situational knowledge and experiential knowledge that the teachers have acquired over time.

Introduction

Miss K taught both grades R and One simultaneously. Learners from both grades were asked to say and act the recitation '*Nogwaja bengihambe ngayizolo*'. This is a rhyme about a rabbit which was taught on the previous day. Learners from both grades were asked to rhyme simultaneously. After they repeated the rhyme several times they sat down.

The teacher showed them some pictures of animals (rhino, giraffe, monkey, zebra, buffalo and a buck). She asked learners to tell her what these animals were called. The introduction of this lesson was quite energetic with almost the whole class being actively involved in the picture activity. Some of the younger learners from Grade R did not know the names of all the animals. The teacher explained where these animals lived and asked whether learners had seen them. The learners indicated that they had not seen these animals.

The teacher read the story 'Horns Only'. This was a story about animals who were invited to a party in the jungle. The animals that had to attend the party were only those animals with horns; however, the monkey and the zebra wore fake horns in order to be accepted at the party. After a lot of partying and dancing, the horns fell off. They were then chased away from the party.

The teacher used a big book in which the story was printed. She showed the learners the cover of the book and asked them to tell her what they saw on the cover. She encouraged learners' responses through asking some questions using the picture cards she had used when introducing the lesson. She started reading from the book, pausing occasionally to ask questions. Grade Ones were more active as compared to Grade Rs. She asked learners to predict what would happen next and she encouraged them to express their thoughts on how they would feel if they were not invited to a party.

The teacher had prepared some flashcards. Words and the names of animals were written next to the picture of the animal. Learners had to look at the picture and then say a word. Grade Ones read these words taking turns as groups and later grade Rs did picture reading. While this was happening, some learners were disruptive and the teacher had to focus her attention on disciplining them.

The above is an observation of a single lesson taught by one of the participants in the study. She was teaching reading in isiZulu to learners in a multi-grade class comprising grade

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R and grade 1 learners. The lesson lasted for approximately 50 minutes, with many discipline interruptions by the learners. Drawing from this observed lesson, it is clear that the teacher was following a lesson routine that included connecting learners with the previous lesson using recitation, settling learners down for the new lesson using a rhyme, introducing the new lesson with pictures of animals that would be in the story, story reading with a big book; keeping track of learner engagement in the story reading through focusing on learner feelings and lesson assessment through group identification of animals, word reading and picture reading. This lesson procedure raises the following questions: Is this a typical lesson progression in an ordinary classroom? How has this teacher come to teach reading in isiZulu in this multi-grade classroom context?

According to the National Reading Strategy (DoE 2008b), reading enables learners to act creatively and critically in a world which is ever-changing and competitive. In the establishment of the Progress in International Reading Literacy Studies in 2001 for assessment of learners' reading achievement, it was declared that children's reading literacy achievement would provide the baseline for future studies of trends in achievement. Thus, reading is a fundamental skill that every learner should possess and is therefore a core element in the foundation phase of schooling under the literacy development focus. Using the narrated observation of a reading lesson in a multi-grade class and recognising the importance of reading as a fundamental learning, this study argues that despite the challenges faced in rural multi-grade teaching contexts, foundation-phase teachers do find adaptive strategies to facilitate the teaching of reading. Therefore, this study presents some of the challenges that multi-grade teachers face in teaching reading with a view to showing how they have adapted their teaching strategies to enable learning to happen.

A review on multi-grade teaching in rural school contexts

Multi-grade schools are a worldwide phenomenon. The concept 'multi-grade teaching' is described in different ways. In some countries, it is called 'multi-groups' or 'multi-class' or 'combination group teaching' (Little 2001). According to Mulryan-Kyne (2007) and Juvane (2005), multi-grade classes comprise more than one grade in one classroom where there is one teacher who is responsible for teaching learners who are in different grades. Little (2001) states that although multi-grading is two-fold, some conditions are a necessity and others are of choice; however, most multi-grade teaching is caused by the former. This generally serves to confirm that schools in rural areas are engaged in multi-grade teaching because of the necessity.

Benveniste and McEwan (2000) articulate that the reality that needs to be considered is that teachers are faced with multiple challenges for teaching in these multi-grade classrooms.

Brown (2009:62) notes that the conditions for learners here as an onset to the excerpt:

are aggravated by the conditions that teachers have to work under; they need to teach these learners using the variety of teaching strategies as stipulated in the curriculum policy, yet there are no special adjustments that are being provided for teachers and learners who are faced with such contexts.

In addition, Ngubane (2011) articulates that curricula across the globe are not structured for multi-grade teaching, which causes teachers to struggle because assistance or guidance from departmental officials is minimal. Furthermore, Brown (2009:72) states that multi-grade teachers '... are unable to adjust the single-grade curriculum to a multi-grade context'. This is thereby contributing intensely to the contextual challenges that teachers are facing.

In the South African context, there are political undertones that multi-grade teaching (and multi-grade schools) should be eradicated, the reality of which may not be realised as multi-grade teaching is well established and widespread, even in urban contexts (Walters 2013). The Multi-grade Research Group (2001) postulates that:

the multi-grade classroom poses a paradox. For children to learn effectively in a multi-grade environment, teachers need to be well trained, well-resourced and hold positive attitudes to multi-grade teaching. (p. 567)

In the South African context, there are no special training programmes for multi-grade teaching. Teachers have to rely on their own agency with little or no support from the Department of Basic Education (Ramathan & Ngubane 2013). The schools are largely under-resourced as most schools where multi-grade teaching (by necessity) takes place are categorised in the lower quintile school categories and usually found in sparsely populated areas where parents have little or no income (Brown 2009).

Nkambule *et al.* (2011:342) state that it is well known that since the end of apartheid in South Africa in 1994, '... rural development and rural education have remained on the margins of progress made in improving people's lives'. This marginalisation is thus compelling teachers, learners and parents to face more challenges as compared to schools situated in urban or semi-urban areas. Balfour, Mitchell and Moletsane (2008) also reveal that these schools are located in areas that are usually not well developed or are only developing slowly. As a result of such conditions, the process of teaching and learning is mostly affected adversely.

Drawing from the accounts of multi-grade teaching, especially in rural contexts, it seems clear that teachers teaching in these situations have to rely on their teacher agency to make decisions on teaching strategies, lesson context, lesson activities and teaching and learning resources to make some impact on learning. Therefore, the agency would include personal attributes as drivers to continue in their quest for facilitating learning, despite the hopelessness of the situation that they face.

Theoretical framework

In order to make sense of how teachers teach reading in a multi-grade teaching context, this study was informed by two theoretical constructs. The first was on Shulman's (1986) notion of pedagogical content knowledge as a critical category for teacher knowledge and the second was on Campbell's notion of teacher agency. It is evident that teaching reading in the foundation phase demands that teachers have appropriate and well-grounded pedagogical content knowledge. Joubert, Bester and Meyer (2008:81) state that teaching reading '... is more than a mere teaching of decoding signs and symbols into sounds and words' alluding to the inclusion of teaching strategies. Therefore, for foundation-phase teachers to teach effectively, they also need to possess high standards of knowledge on the methods to be utilised for teaching the content. Shulman (1986:9) states that teachers '... should demonstrate powerful forms and ways of representing and formulating the subject that will make it comprehensible to others'. Hence, understanding how these foundation-phase teachers acquire these forms of pedagogical content knowledge will illuminate what agency teachers have and how they use their agency to make pedagogical decisions based on their contextual realities. Therefore, Shulman's concept of pedagogical content knowledge is an appropriate theoretical lens to illuminate and understand how teachers make sense of their teaching context, draw from their experiences of teaching in such context and make pedagogical decisions on how best to teach particular content, in this case teaching reading within a multi-grade classroom with learners who are in grade R and One simultaneously.

Teacher agency is closely linked to Shulman's notion of pedagogical content knowledge, focusing on the decision-making processes of teachers. Agency, as explained by Campbell (2012), is that which empowers an individual to make free and independent choices that lead to autonomous actions by exercising judgement based on a rationality that one can account for. Teacher agency shifts this empowerment from any individual to a teacher who is empowered to make such decisions and exercise judgements related to teaching, learning and the learning context. Teacher agency is, therefore, a useful theoretical construct to explain why these foundation-phase teachers teach reading the way they do within a multi-grade classroom setting.

Teacher adaptation can then be more clearly understood through the lens of teacher agency and pedagogical content knowledge that teachers acquire over time as they forge ahead in teaching within a context that is limited in all respects, among others, limited facilities, limited resources, limited teacher training and limited ongoing professional development. These two theoretical constructs frame the analysis of the data leading to the conclusions reached in this article.

Methodology

A qualitative research, framed within an interpretive epistemology study was conducted to produce the empirical

evidence for this study. Marshall and Rossman (2006:1) strongly recommend qualitative research as a genre '... that is becoming an increasingly important mode of inquiry for the social sciences and fields such as education'. The interpretive paradigm approach allowed us to understand how these individual foundation-phase teachers set out to understand their interpretations of the world around them (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2011), especially within a rural setting with its own set of sociological issues. As teachers' experience of teaching in a multi-grade teaching context was the focus of this research, the research sites were purposively chosen to be rural schools where multi-grade teaching was more prevalent (Ramrathan & Ngubane 2013). Hence, two primary schools, located within a rural context, were selected as the research sites. The schools were situated in the Ndwedwe Circuit that fell under the Ilembe District in the province of KwaZulu-Natal.

Case study as a methodology was used for this research. Rule and John (2011:7) confirm that case studies '... assist in generating an understanding of and insight into a particular instance by providing a thick, rich description of the case and illuminating its relations to its broader context'. This was an exploratory case study described by Rule and John (2011:8) as '... an attempt to explain what happens in a particular case or why it happens'. The focus of this study was on teachers' experiences of teaching in a multi-grade classroom context; hence, the case study was the teacher, more specifically two foundation-phase teachers, each teaching in separate schools. The research, therefore, took on a multi-case study methodology with the purpose of strengthening the analytical generalisability (Henning 2004) that can be derived from case study research. Ms K was a grade R and grade 1 teacher. She had a Primary Teachers' Diploma with 12 years of teaching experience, 3 of which were in multi-grade teaching. Ms L was doing her second year of the National Professional Diploma in Education to upgrade her qualification. She had 6 years teaching experience, 1 of which was in multi-grade teaching. The class sizes were in the region of 30 learners. In Ms K's class there were 13 grade Rs and 18 grade 1s.

The data were generated through observations of lessons taught by the participants over a period of 2 weeks. Ten lessons were observed for each teacher over the 2-week period. Observation during the actual teaching enabled us to receive the natural reality of multi-grade classes and helped us to make sense of how reading was taking place (Maree 2007). Observation notes were recorded, using an observation schedule. The construction of the observation schedule was both structured and unstructured. The structured parts were informed by literature on pedagogy and the theoretical framework on teaching reading, while the unstructured component of the observation schedule was developed along lesson moments from beginning to end. This unstructured observation allowed us to capture the dynamics of the classroom and teachers' responses to these dynamics. For the purpose of this study, one lesson of teaching reading in a multi-grade class (comprising grade R and grade 1 learners) was selected. Semi-structured interviews with the two participating

teachers were interspersed throughout the observation period. Six interviews with each teacher were held over a 2-week period. The observed lessons were used as points of engagement with participants through the interview process. Cohen *et al.* (2011) assert that a sufficiently open-ended interview enables the content to be re-ordered, and for further probing to be undertaken, which was valuable for the study.

The data produced during the interviews were coded using firstly open coding and later axial coding (Merriam 2009). Axial coding refers to themes that are influenced by the research questions guiding the study. The questions related to teaching reading, challenges and addressing of challenges. Teaching reading in the foundation phase was selected as the aspect of literacy. The language of teaching and learning was isiZulu. The number of observations and the link between the interviews and the observed lessons brought credibility to the research process. Teachers' deeper thoughts on their teaching practices were probed by making reference to different moments in the lessons. This brought about greater trustworthiness to the data-gathering process.

While the process of data production seems sanitised and smooth, there were several issues that disrupted the process. These included not being able to observe a planned lesson because of time inconsistency for lessons. Some lessons took longer to complete while some finished early because of several reasons, including time management by teachers, learner discipline disruptions and administrative demands. Being at the research site for the duration of the data production process provided the flexibility to accommodate time issues. Getting detailed and in-depth information from the participants about their experiences of teaching reading in the multi-grade contexts was a challenge. Superficial responses were probed through the use of information gleaned from the observations to encourage the participants to think deeply and to articulate their thinking that influenced their teaching practices. The language through which the interviews with the participants took place was predominantly English, which added to the difficulty of gaining deeper insights from teachers on their teaching practice. Being multi-lingual, the interviewer used English as the predominant means of communicating and isiZulu when deeper information was needed. These challenging issues were anticipated during the planning process for the data collection. In order to minimise the effects of these limitations, it was necessary to be on site for a longer period of time – 2 weeks was then deemed to be adequate. In addition, the interview process took on an iterative process. This included probes on observed aspects of lessons. Participants were given the opportunity to reflect on their teaching.

A further constraint in the data collection process was the presence of the researcher. Researchers entering rural schools are a rare phenomenon, which drew extreme curiosity from all – teachers, managers and learners. It was difficult to establish whether the data collected at the research site were greatly influenced by this intrusion and the prevailing scepticism of our presence or by that of the normality of its

teaching and learning environment. We were acutely reminded of St. Pierre's (1999) notion of imagined response when she interviewed older White women while doing an ethnographic study on the daily lives of these women. Her notion of imagined response was that participants imagined what the researcher might want to hear in response to her questions and responded accordingly. The combining of observations and interviews over the 2-week period allowed us to mitigate this imagined response that led to a more authentic data set.

Specific attention was paid to ethical considerations. The principal of the school and the Ndwedwe Circuit Manager were contacted for permission to conduct this research. Clear and precise outlines of the research were presented, and the aim of the research was disclosed to foundation-phase teachers, the principal and circuit manager. All participants were guaranteed anonymity through the use of pseudonyms and a pseudonym was given to the school. The participants and the school principal were informed of their rights to participate in the research process, including the unconditional right to withdraw their participation or permission to further engage in the research process.

Findings

Knowing and doing: the in situ transitional gap

The participants were not able to translate theory into practice. They found it difficult to use their knowledge about what and how to teach reading in the foundation phase and apply it to their practice especially in the context of combined grades. The data collected from the two foundation-phase teachers revealed that they were aware that reading plays an important role in the teaching of isiZulu Home Language in the foundation phase of schooling. They were having difficulties in dealing with addressing children's reading needs according to the age and stage of development.

Miss L said:

'Yes, I believe that knowing how to read is important, but tell me how do you tell when a learner is not really reading. Just imagine in my class I have Grades R and 1 combined and I can't teach them 'imisindo' (phonics) that they are supposed to be in, I'm always left behind. I know really that knowing to read is very important.'

Multi-grade teaching of reading seemed to lag behind the expectations of what learners should learn, using mono-grade teaching as a benchmark. Hence, despite having the knowledge of what and how to teach reading to learners in these multi-grade classes, achieving the required level of competence was a major challenge for them. The implications are that these learners lag behind in their expected learning, the time to teach the learners is not sufficient and the coverage of teaching is far less than expected in a mono-grade class.

Mono-grade to multi-grade teaching: curriculum knowledge adaptation

To explore the curriculum knowledge that these teachers possessed, we had to clearly understand the terminology

'curriculum knowledge'. Shulman (1986) describes curriculum knowledge as a critical category for teacher knowledge as it demands that the teacher understands the curriculum. Ngubane (2011) states that the curriculum that teachers generally implement, even in rural areas, is intended for mono-grade classes, implying that there may be no curriculum designed specifically for multi-grade teaching. Therefore, curriculum knowledge for teaching reading in multi-grade classes was a complex issue for the teachers in this context as the transition from mono-grade teaching to multi-grade teaching is not always possible. This is particularly significant taking into account the curriculum changes in the foundation phase.

Ms L said:

'I am confused ... [laughing], I really do not know what to teach and what not to teach. The Department is really confusing us, it was first OBE, then RNCS, then NCS, then FFL and now CAPS is in force ... mmm ... I think these people should come to teach on their own, who do they talk to before changing the curriculum? They don't even care about us here in rural schools, they also don't care that we are teaching multi-grade classes. All they do is just change the curriculum, and we are at stake I am telling you. I just teach reading in whatever way, but I usually teach it the way I was also taught during my primary education years and the knowledge of teaching that I received when I trained as a teacher.'

Defaulting to intuitive teaching, an aspect of teacher agency, is an adaptive strategy used by the multi-grade teachers. Deciding what to teach, how to teach and when to teach is the adaptive competence that these teachers have developed in order to facilitate teaching and learning. Furthermore, traditional teaching methods that they were exposed to as trainee teachers formed the bedrock for these teachers to enable the minimal teaching that was possible in the classroom context. Repetition and rhyme were examples of traditional teaching methods that were used by these teachers.

Curriculum knowledge involves many programmes in which teachers have to engage (Ball, Thames and Phelps 2008) so as to gain knowledge of what they should teach. Thus, they have a critical duty where they must have the knowledge of the curriculum that they present to the learners. Shulman (1986:10) states that it is expected that: '... a professional teacher be familiar with the curriculum materials under that subject and what his or her students are studying in other subjects'. Drawing from the data produced, it was evident that these teachers had to function in a complex context and that the DoE's intervention to assist them was doubtful. Therefore, this omission prevented these teachers from fully understanding and implementing the curriculum to teach reading in isiZulu Home Language. This also barred them from understanding that 'teaching reading is more than mere teaching decoding signs and symbols into sounds and words' (Joubert *et al.* 2008:81). Although they participated in a number of workshops and cluster meetings, they indicated that they did not have enough curriculum knowledge as they

saw themselves being marginalised and confused because of teaching in multi-grade classes and not having a set curriculum to guide them. Clearly, these teachers tended to rely on situation knowledge that guided their teaching of reading. While Ball *et al.* (2008) advocate that curriculum knowledge involves many programmes in which teachers need to engage, the reality was that these teachers had very few programmes available to them because of the remote locality of their school.

Teaching reading using national guidelines

The Handbook on Teaching Reading in the Early Years and the National Reading Strategy (DoE 2008b) state that, irrespective of context, teachers have to teach learners to read using different kinds of strategies. Minskoff (2005) also affirms that the only solution to developing good reading skills in learners is to use different methods and strategies. The strategies that are indicated in both the Handbook on Teaching Reading in the Early Years and the National Reading Strategy (DoE 2008b) do not address strategies for teaching reading in multi-grade classes as the strategies are for mono-grade classes. These strategies include exposure to environmental print, shared reading, group-guided reading, independent reading and reading aloud. Using these strategies as a guide to explore how multi-grade teachers teach reading, the participants indicated that some were more useful than others, while some were not conducive for their teaching practices and thus created challenges. The National Reading Strategy (DoE 2008b) indicates the following strategies as suitable to be used when teaching reading at the foundation phase:

Environmental print

Environmental print comprises those written texts that the child sees in his everyday life such as billboards, advertisements, cartoons, food packaging and clothing labels (DoE 2008b). This print serves as an emergent stage of reading. The participants were interviewed about the knowledge they had about using this strategy for teaching reading.

Miss K. said:

'I first acquired knowledge for teaching reading through my engagement with learners; I developed my own ways of understanding how they learn to read and what techniques to apply when learners are behaving in a certain way. Angikaze ngiyisebenzise lendlala oyishoyo (I have never used this strategy you are speaking about), but what about this situation we are ... multi-grading, it is really hard, our learners are very poor in reading, we do not offer them enough time for it anyway ...'

Rural communities are generally not exposed to massive advertisement and billboards and even if there are some, most would be printed in English. Kebeje (2004) alludes to the fact that economic conditions in rural areas are leading to poverty, backwardness and powerlessness among these people. Moreover, the products that they buy from the local

stores usually have labels printed in English. Hence, relying on environmental print to support and promote teaching of reading in the mother tongue in a rural community within a multi-grade class will have minimal impact as these teachers would not be able to use these resources to teach reading.

In the absence of supportive elements within the environment, these teachers relied on intuition, experience and situational appraisal, which were not based on any sound pedagogical principles and theories. Knowledge of what is to be taught was evident; however, their situational appraisal skills informed their teaching practice and their adaptive skills were reinforced over several cycles of their teaching. Multi-grade classes do offer these teachers opportunities to teach a cohort of learners over a 2-year period. Hence, they do have the opportunity of a second cycle of teaching. Based on his research in the Amathole District, Brown (2009) reveals that teachers in multi-grade classes often develop methods that best suit them. However, he states that if teachers can have a good grasp of their subject matter knowledge and if their pedagogical skills are suited to multi-grade teaching, they will be more adaptable and flexible in their teaching approaches. In the process of adapting to contextual realities, these teachers do improvise and use these stimuli to the benefit of their learners.

Shared reading

According to the Handbook on Teaching Reading in the Early Years (Department of Education [DoE] 2008a) and National Reading Strategy (DoE 2008b), shared reading is when a teacher and learners are reading a common text. The main purpose of using this strategy is to enable learners to see the words when reading them while simultaneously hearing them. National Reading Strategy (DoE 2008b) recommends that when the teacher is using this strategy, big books, texts on charts and other reading resources that have huge and easily-visible fonts should be used. The observed lesson presented in the introduction of this article alludes to this strategy used by foundation-phase teachers teaching in multi-grade classes.

Furthermore, Miss K adds:

‘Yes, it is easy teaching reading using this method but while helping the other group some of the learners find this to be a good time to misbehave.’

In a classroom that is multi-graded, teachers prefer to use shared reading as all learners are engaged in the reading activity simultaneously. Hugo (2010) states that although the shared reading method allows learners to access written text that is above their reading level, teachers’ assistance is imperative throughout the reading activity. However, in a multi-grade classroom, it is generally perceived that if there is a lack of resources, this strategy may result in failure in accomplishing the intended purposes. Divided attention of the teacher across the two groups of learners in the multi-grade class will result in discipline issues among the learners.

These teachers would now have to contend with teaching reading across two grades, disruptive learners and a lack of resources. This presents a cocktail that would certainly compromise teaching and learning. However, this seems to be the favoured method of teaching reading to learners in a multi-grade classroom context, despite its disruptive challenges.

The use of a single large book for shared reading worked for these teachers. The different learning expectation for each of the grades in the multi-grade class was made possible by observable variances. For example, word reading and picture reading formed the variances among grade 1 and grade R, respectively.

Independent reading

Independent reading demands setting aside time that is used exclusively for reading. When reading independently, each learner is expected to read material or a book that interests him or her individually. According to the National Reading Strategy (DoE 2008b), time has to be set aside in each school for learners and teachers to be engaged in ‘Drop All and Read’ sessions. To do this, each classroom needs a range of authentic materials at an age-appropriate level for learners to enjoy their reading.

Participants were asked whether they set aside time for learners to drop everything and read and give reports to the class or group.

Miss K said:

‘Yes, we do have that period and learners are really trying, but the problem is with the reading resources, we don’t have them here in our school.’

Miss L said:

‘I always try with my learners but they are still young, they need my help because we don’t have resources. They end up reading one and the same books and find that others are suitable for a certain grade and not the other.’

The greatest challenge to independent reading in the school was the lack of resources and the inconsistent supply of new reading materials. Moreover, rural learners have very little access to books in their homes. For these reasons, it was difficult for these teachers to use this form of pedagogy on an ongoing basis. The learners would have read most of the books that would be available to them. Repeat reading of the same text would result in boredom, disruptive behaviour among the learners and no growth in knowledge for the learners. Furthermore, teachers found it difficult to distribute the available books among the learners in a manner that would support learning. Distribution of limited reading material became a technical exercise merely to ensure that the learners would have something to read. This negated the need for appropriate and age-related reading material. This contextual appraisal of resources and the implications of repeat reading of the same texts led these teachers to pay less

attention to this strategy for teaching reading; therefore, it was not done as frequently as required.

Reading aloud

The National Reading Strategy (DoE 2008b) articulates that reading aloud is when the teacher reads a text aloud to the learners and the learners read after the teacher. With the reading aloud teaching strategy, the text is at a higher level than the level to which the learners who can read independently are accustomed to (Singh 2010).

Participants showed much interest in this method as they indicated that although they were teaching in multi-grade classes, working with texts using this method was viable.

Miss K said:

'I really like this method of teaching reading and my learners like it too. It is useful even to those learners who are in the other grade because they all read along. We read stories together.'

Miss L said:

'This is a very good method in our situation. We all read, both grades read simultaneously. Their vocabulary increases and the way words are pronounced in their Home Language also develop.'

These teachers believed that reading aloud was shown to benefit learners in multi-grade contexts; therefore, it was a favoured approach to teaching reading in a multi-grade classroom. Younger learners benefit from acquiring more vocabulary and the appropriate pronunciation of different words. Older learners also benefit from this approach as they would have had this opportunity in their previous year of schooling and the repeat process helps reinforce their learning. Furthermore, this is one opportunity in which the whole class can participate without the teacher making any differentiation in the teaching strategy or the teaching content. The reading aloud teaching exercise, thus focuses on a technical issue of word pronunciation and word acquisition rather than on comprehension of reading.

Discussions of findings

Drawing from the lesson observation presented in the introduction of this article and from the interviews with the participants, it was clear that several action steps were required to teach reading in a multi-grade class. The use of rhyme to re-cap the previous day's work was a useful strategy used by the teacher to do two things. Firstly, it was used as a way of reminding the learners of what they had learnt the previous day, and secondly, it was used as a strategy to bring the class to order so that the new lesson could start in a disciplined manner. Other strategies that were used by the teacher to focus the learners' attention included the use of a large reading book so that the learners could see the book and its pictures clearly. Hence, the choice of the book was an important consideration in the teaching of reading in this multi-grade classroom. Word reading and picture reading

were intended as differentiation strategies between the two grades in this class, and this was made possible by the use of flashcards and pictures. The flashcards with words targeted the grade 1 learners while the large pictures of animals targeted grade R learners.

Timetable considerations of what needs to be taught, how the content should be taught and how long the teacher should spend on teaching a content was not of material benefit to the teacher and therefore not adhered to. Contextual realities, the nature of learners and what content was possible to teach formed the basis of teacher appraisal that informed their teaching practice. Teacher agency and their adaptive skills were strategies relied on by these multi-grade teachers in facilitating teaching and learning in their classes. External inputs into teaching of reading within a multi-grade classroom in a rural school are clearly something that may not assist these teachers. One has to immerse oneself in such teaching situations and learn by experience as a way of gaining knowledge through practice.

These teachers relied on adapting teaching strategies to the situation. For example, oscillating between standing and sitting was one way of making the teacher visible and acknowledging the presence of learners in the teaching process as was observed in the lesson taught by one teacher. Other strategies included the whole class being interspersed by grade-based emphasis during the lesson. When and how one should do this is largely by trial and error developed through experience over time. Use of diverse learning materials and activities during the lesson and encouraging learners to imagine what would happen as the story unfolds are additional strategies that assisted teachers in teaching reading in a context-deprived situation.

Teacher development, curriculum support and curriculum structure were clearly lacking for these teachers, suggesting that they had to rely on their professionalism or teacher agency to teach in such teaching contexts. Campbell (2012) argues that teacher agency is the capacity of teachers to use their professional discretion in their teaching practice, despite being bounded by structure and form (in this case that of CAPS curriculum). While these teachers know what they had to teach and how to teach, they used their agency to decide what is appropriate within the teaching situation. Their understanding of what is appropriate had been developed through experience of adaptation, over time, of their generic learning, both, in content and process. They understood their limitations of meeting curriculum expectations, but the multi-grade context provided them with the space to accomplish their intended objectives, realising that not all learners would receive the expected learning.

A curriculum for multi-grade teaching is a sophistication that requires a careful assessment of potentiality of achievement across content, context, pedagogy and teacher competence. Hence, a loaded content curriculum is futile in achieving nationally set outcomes in these contexts. Having more

specific outcomes of learning within a multi-grade class and of rural school education will reduce the stress of teachers and learners, thereby creating a context of exploration and adaptation, developed through experience over time that will provide appropriate and quality education relative to these learners. Professionalism in their teaching practices will take on a more nuanced approach to teacher development and can be sustained if rapid teacher turnover in these contexts is stemmed.

Conclusion

In this study, we have explored the situational realities of teaching reading in foundation-phase multi-grade classrooms through the lens of two foundation-phase teachers. Clearly, the realities of multi-grade teaching through this case study are complex, the teacher being the central influencing factor in mediating teaching and learning. Teacher agency has been identified as crucial in making adaptive decisions, which were based on the intersection of formal knowledge, situational knowledge and experiential knowledge that the teachers have acquired over time. Accountability and meeting all learning objectives were marginalised in their teaching practices as they had to take pedagogical decisions that made sense in the situation.

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Competing interests

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Authors' contributions

J.M. provided the empirical evidence and the literature review emanating from her Masters dissertation under the supervision of L.R. L.R. provided the analysis, theorising, structuring and conceptualising of this article.

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