

**COUNTERING THE CHALLENGES WITH MULTI-GRADE TEACHING OF
FOUNDATION PHASE TEACHERS IN THE JOE GQABI DISTRICT, EASTERN
CAPE PROVINCE**

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DECLARATION

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I declare that the above dissertation is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

I further declare that I submitted the dissertation to originality checking software and that it falls within the accepted requirements for originality.

I further declare that I have not previously submitted this work, or part of it, for examination at Unisa for another qualification or at any other higher education institution.



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ABSTRACT

The study aimed to explore strategies that Foundation Phase teachers may use to counter multi-grade teaching challenges. The study's objective was to identify the challenges teachers encounter in multi-grade teaching and suggest strategies to alleviate them. The study adopted a qualitative research approach to allow the researcher to study participants' lived- experiences. A case study design was adopted because it was user-friendly. This broad-based approach could draw adequate and accurate information within the short time needed to answer the research questions. Furthermore, the researcher used Bronfenbrenner's Theory to allow the exploration of multi-grade teaching challenges. Additionally, the study was guided by the Montessori Educational Theory, whose theoretical framework is learner-oriented and mixed-ages. The literature review explored the origins of multi-grade teaching, its effects on learner's performance, factors contributing to multi-grade teaching, inadequate learning opportunities, and strategies to alleviate the challenges of teaching multi-grade classrooms. The study used three data collection instruments, namely semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and observation. Moreover, purposive sampling was used to select the participants, namely principals, Heads of Departments and teachers. The thematic data analysis process was followed in order to read data easily across the whole data set. The study's findings indicated that teachers were not trained for multi-grade situations; thus, they lacked the relevant skills for such an environment. Finally, recommendations for future research were put forward based on the findings.

KEY TERMS

multi-grade, curriculum, School Management Team, stress, workload, classroom management, cooperative learning, mono-grade classroom, self-directed learning

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

DoE	Department of Education
UNISA	University of South Africa
SGB	School Governing Body
CME	Continuing Medical Education
SASA	South African Schools Act
CAPS	Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement
CEPD	Continuing Education Professional Development
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
LEPO	Legislative Environmental Policy Office
ACE	Advisory Centre for Education
BEd	Bachelor of Education
MEd	Master of Education
DEd	Doctor of Education
FGI	Focus Group Interview
HOD	Head of Department
II	Individual Interview
DBE	Department of Basic Education
NCS	National Curriculum Statement
RMC	Regional Management Centre

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CHAPTER 1: ORIENTATION TO THE STUDY

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Teachers in rural areas and farm schools of South Africa remain disadvantaged in teaching and ensuring good quality learning experiences compared to those who teach in urban areas (McEwan, 1999:849). It is in early childhood that the foundations for human development are laid. Hence, a child's quality of education during the initial years is crucial because of the fundamental skills and competencies taught during those initial years (McEwan, 1999:849). Multi-grade teaching posed a significant challenge for teachers in the Foundation Phase, ensuring that each learner receives the necessary individual attention. Thus, the study aims to establish the perceived challenges that Foundation Phase teachers experience and how it affects them physically, mentally and emotionally.

However, multi-grade teaching allows learners to access quality education, particularly those previously neglected and in sparsely inhabited areas (Hangiri, 2014). Rural areas and farm schools suffer from a severe teacher shortage. Jean Bert (2010) defines multi-grade teaching as educating learners at different grade levels in the same class and at the same time. Due to a limited number of school employees, the Foundation Phase teachers shared the workload of learning areas. In many African states, the government often neglects multi-grade schools that focus on improving conventional schools in multi-grade teaching (Joubert, 2010). Most often, multi-grade teaching is found in rural schools and farm schools.

The Ministerial Committee on Rural Education report called multi-grade education defiance, including classroom management, curriculum load in rural schools, and special skills necessary for teachers (DoE, 2011). Education plays a significant role in efforts to promote and achieve sustainable human development in South Africa. However, one challenge facing the education sector in South Africa is the shortage of teachers in different phases of the school system. In addition, a low-level interest in trained teachers working in schools in remote rural areas. Further investigation was done by Haingura (2014) on multi-grade teaching in the Okavango region; the study

showed that teachers in multi-grade schools are not trained in methodologies and classroom organisation developed to work with children of different ages and different abilities in one class. It is evident from the study that most of the schools lacked appropriate teaching materials. The available teaching material was for mono-grade classrooms; thus, hampering effective teaching and learning. The findings from the study on the use of resources were also the respondents' answers on how they expressed their frustration with these challenges.

Maness (2014) examined how teachers in multi-grade classrooms manage and use available resources. Therefore, the researcher was interested in exploring the challenges facing teachers in multi-grade classrooms so that recommendations on mitigation strategies could be put forward. This came after realising that most studies did not suggest many strategies teachers could use to counter their challenges in teaching and learning within the multi-grade context.

1.2 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The South African constitution and South African School Acts (SASA) (Act 84 of 1996) state that good quality education is the vision for South African society (DoE, 2005:46). Various reasons led to multi-grade teaching in many countries and in South Africa. Multi-grade classes were found in rural areas and farm schools, where teachers face challenges such as overcrowded classrooms and low enrolment. More than two million children attend multi-grade schools daily in South Africa (SA). The Centre for Multi-Grade Education (CME) in Wellington SA has contributed to the quality of education in rural multi-grade schools where the need is more critical than in urban multi-grade schools. Joubert (2010) believed that there is a need for new research approaches that directly address practice problems in multi-grade classrooms as it is a problem in the educational system. Furthermore, another problem that led to multi-grade classrooms in schools was low enrolment.

Matchbox (2011) also examined the benefits and challenges of multi-grade learning and teaching in an East London District primary school. The dissertation analysed participants' lives and experiences using a qualitative research approach. Considering the perspective of multi-graded teachers, the dissertation findings revealed that it

became evident that the challenges of teaching multi-grade classes were mainly related to the struggles they were experiencing. There were relatively few challenges associated with learning in a multi-grade setting.

According to Titus (2004), multi-grade schools in Namibia are often far from educational centres and receive little support in teaching. Moreover, one of the studies on teaching mathematics in a multi-grade classroom revealed that poor knowledge in multi-grade teaching could cause disciplinary problems in multi-grade and mono-grade classrooms (Kapenda, 2010). Little (2010) added that for children to be successful in multi-grade environments, teachers must be well-trained and well-resourced, and their approach to multi-grade teaching has to be positive. Moreover, Little (2010) reported that the Eastern Cape Province is among many with multi-grade settings, particularly in schools located in farm and rural areas.

There has been a renewed and increased interest in the practice of multi-grade teaching in the country (Brown, 2011). This has mainly been triggered by concerns about teacher shortage due to out-migration and lower entrants to teacher education programmes, irregular yearly enrolment of learners in some schools in rural areas, and apathy among teachers to work in remote rural. The criticism of this approach was that the teachers in these classrooms seemed more concerned about the higher grade curriculum. In addition, the respondent teachers seemed to be silent about the gap created by focusing on the higher grade curriculum at the expense of the lower grade not being taught what was appropriate to its level. Brown (2007) concurred with SASA (Act 84 of 1996) that multi-grade teaching had triggered concerns about teacher shortages and irregular yearly enrolment of learners in some schools, mainly in rural areas and farm schools.

There has been a renewed interest in the practice of multi-grade teaching in the country (Brown, 2008; Brown, 2007; Joubert, 2007). This was caused by teacher shortage due to displacement and no recruitment to teacher education programmes, irregular yearly enrolment of learners in some schools in mainly rural areas, and apathy among teachers to work in distant rural and populated villages (Brown, 2007; Department of Education, 2005b; Mathot, 1998).

The DoE (2015) described multi-grade schools as a regular teaching and learning procedure. Human Rights Watch (2004) stated that low enrolment schools make up 13% of admissions in farm schools. According to the Education Management Information System (2007), no report on multi-grade teaching is produced in South Africa. Nevertheless, Brown (2007) states that no national audit of the schools' practices had been conducted. During the 2005 Ministerial Task Team on Education in South Africa (DoE, 2005), multi-grade teaching was allocated to the work-life of teachers in primary schools in rural areas. The requisition of educational activities reported by Human Rights Watch and Mathot's (1998) study all helped support schools in 2004. In such conditions, schools engaged in multi-grade teaching were experiencing worse challenges than those with mono-grade teaching practices. In South Africa, Foundation Phase education became a priority to ensure the quality of education for young children in the initial years of schooling practices (Ngubane, 2011:53). A classroom was where learners acquired knowledge and became successful in society.

1.3 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Multi-grade teaching has been a challenge for teachers in rural primary schools. Teachers have been forced to utilise various teaching methods and daily strategies designed for single-grade teaching without any support from the government to assist teachers of multi-grade classrooms (Ramrathan & Mzimela, 2016:33). The pre-service training of prospective South African teachers at colleges and universities did not prepare teachers for teaching in a multi-grade classroom context. This has caused teachers to rely on their own strategies and resources without support from the DoE (Ngubani, 2011). Furthermore, due to the heterogeneity challenges teachers in multi-grade classes face, they negatively perceive multi-grade classes (Brown, 2008).

There was a shortage of classrooms and teachers in the school where the researcher worked, which affected learners enrolment. Only a few teachers were left to manage multi-grade classes. Some grades were amalgamated in order to ensure that teaching and learning took place. In the Foundation Phase, teachers were faced with the challenge of teaching multiple grades in one class. Among these challenges, teachers were teaching two different grades in one class simultaneously and being liable to

teach not fewer than four grades. Thus, to counter these challenges, the researcher conducted a study on multi-grade teaching in the Joe Gqabi District of the Eastern Cape Province to identify ways to overcome the challenges.

1.4 MAIN RESEARCH QUESTION

What strategies could Foundation Phase teachers use to counter multi-grade teaching challenges?

1.4.1 Sub-research questions

- What does multi-grade teaching imply?
- What are the causes of multi-grade teaching challenges in the Foundation Phase?
- What are the challenges experienced by multi-grade teachers in implementing the curriculum?"
- How can teachers implement strategies to counter challenges in multi-grade teaching in the Foundation Phase?

1.5 AIM AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study aims to suggest strategies that Foundation Phase teachers could use to counter multi-grade teaching challenges.

The objectives of the study were:

- To understand the concept of multi-grade teaching.
- To explore the challenges encountered by teachers in multi-grade teaching.
- To determine the challenges associated with multi-grade teaching in the Foundation Phase.
- To explore various ways teachers can mitigate challenges in multi-grade teaching in the Foundation Phase.

1.6 PRELIMINARY LITERATURE REVIEW

The following section of this chapter discusses literature relevant to reading practices in urban multi-grade classes in the Foundation Phase. To contextualise the study, the review highlights the physical setting of the multi-grade classroom, the benefits of urban multi-grade teaching, and the limitations of the multi-grade class settings. It also compares the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) 2005 and the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), the stages of reading development, and various reading practices.

Essentially, this chapter focuses on multi-grade teaching practices in an African context, a multi-grade teaching perspective, and a multi-grade teaching perspective from a global perspective. The literature review will also include aspects of the research questions, including managing discipline in multi-grade teaching and teaching strategies for multi-grade classes. Moreover, multi-grade teaching factors, challenges faced by teachers, the role of the state in facilitating multi-grade classes, teacher support in multi-grade classes, and the negative effects of multi-grade classes will also be discussed.

1.6.1 The multi-grade teaching concept

Throughout mainstream schooling in South Africa, the single-grade structure is the most common method for arranging classes. However, teaching multiple grade levels simultaneously is not an unusual practice (Joubert, 2010). Multi-grade schools make up 27% of all schools in the country (CEPD, 2011). According to the Centre for Multi-Grade Education, 7 000 South African schools use multi-grade teaching, most of which are situated in rural or remote areas (Joubert, 2010).

1.6.2 Effects of multi-grade teaching

Insufficient infrastructure such as roads, electricity, water, and untrained teachers affect multi-grade schools in South Africa, particularly in rural or distant areas (Vinjevold & Schinder, 1997). According to CEPD (2010), Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal have the highest number of multi-grade schools in South Africa. South African schools in rural areas suffer from a shortage of classrooms due to increased learners

numbers and severe financial constraints. This results in multi-grade classes at schools. South African teachers in rural areas face overcrowding and a lack of discipline amongst learners due to family disintegration (Mathot, 1998:87). A further challenge is exacerbated by the lack of training for teachers teaching in multi-grade classrooms, which was crucial in ensuring that education changed people's lives for the better, according to the vision of the African National Congress.

Taylor (2008) states that South African teachers are dedicated to ensuring successful learning through effective teaching of the poor. However, due to high learner numbers in the face of financial constraints resulting in a lack of adequate teachers and classrooms, multi-grade teaching carries out the function of providing what is possible in terms of education to children with poor access to proper education (Birch & Lally, 1995; Mulryan-Kayne & Juvane, 2005a).

1.6.3 Characteristic of multi-grade teaching

Multi-grade schools offer all grades through a multi-grade teaching model, while partial multi-grade schools offer some grades through a multi-grade teaching model. Other grades are taught in a monograde model.

1.6.4 Circumstances leading to multi-grade teaching

With the low enrolment of learners, particularly in rural areas, and the implementation of the staff norms policy of 2001 that required 1/35 teachers for every 50 learners, Namibian schools introduced multi-grade teaching (MoE, 2011a:57). This method is also used in rural areas, where forming a class is challenging due to the low number of school-going children. During such instances, multi-grade teaching takes place. Regarding the expansion of universal primary education, multi-grade teaching has been shaped primarily by the population, but pedagogical theories have also contributed to the interest in this type of teaching.

It is evident in South Africa that multi-grade teaching is common in rural schools (Aksoy, 2008; Brown, 2009; Ngubane, 2011). Little (2007) explains that the main reason for this is that rural areas face dwindling populations because their populations

migrate to big cities. Brown (2009) states that parents take their children along during mass migration to cities, negatively affecting learner enrolment. Low learner enrolment leads to multi-grading as the sole solution to the challenge. Little (2001) affirms this by articulating that, in all countries, multi-grade teaching is found in rural areas and arises primarily through necessity.

1.6.5 Comparison of multi-grade to other countries.

Despite its uniqueness, multi-grade classes in Namibia do not differ from those in other advanced nations; they have been a method of teaching in Namibia since formal education began (MoE, 2011). Globally speaking, in China, the terms 'multiple grade classes' or 'multiple-group teachings' are preferred (Brown, 2010:7). Generally, these terms refer to ability level and age-based groupings rather than grade-level differences. Alternatively, the structure of a multi-grade class may be based on the learners' ability and age.

The practice of multi-grade teaching is also prevalent in China; when teaching learners with different ability levels and a class of Chinese learners who are to be taught in their native dialects (Birch, Lally & Brown, 2010). Schools in Greece with multiple grades are called mono-grade schools, where the teachers' number is counted rather than the grades. For example, in a monograde school (Grades 1 to 6), only one teacher is responsible for teaching all grades (Brown, 2010).

In different parts of the world, classes are combined in various ways and for varied reasons. For instance, in the Australian education system, these classes are defined in three main ways, namely 'composite' classes, 'multi-grade' classes, and 'multi-age' classes (Cornish, 2006). Composite classes often consist of a learner population comprising more than one grade because the division of learners into even-sized classes cannot occur. These classes with 'left-over' children from different stages of development learn together (Cornish, 2006).

1.6.7 Challenges encountered by teachers in multi-grade teaching

Teaching multi-grade groups may be challenging for teachers since they need to modify their instructional materials and activities to meet the needs of children of various grades and ages (Quail & Smyth, 2014). Taole and Mncube (2012) also point out that classroom management is another problem with multi-grade teaching. It is noticed that when the teacher is engaged with one group, the other group would be busy with a task to be accomplished. As a result, learners complete the task without the teacher's assistance because the teacher wants to keep learners busy and disciplined while teaching another group.

Applying a multi-grade teaching syllabus was contingent on teachers' will to apply for these programmes effectively. Teachers' willingness to be associated with multi-grade teaching was influenced by certain factors, namely the lack of faith in multi-grade pedagogy, professional and social isolation when involved in multi-grade teaching, and ownership of multi-grade teaching (Beneviste & McEwan, 2000). Each of these factors had suggestions for the effective growth of multi-grade teaching programmes in South African society. However, Little (2005) states that teachers generally view mono-grade teaching as the 'normal' way to organise classes, while multi-grade classes are considered an unavoidable nuisance. Consequently, teachers are resistant to the idea of being trained in multi-grade teaching methods (Gower, 2010). Therefore, there is a need to convince teachers and others in the field of education about the merits of multi-grade pedagogy.

Brown (2010:194) argues that learners of different grades comprise one class in the multi-grade arrangement, yet pursue grade-appropriate curricula. Lingam (cited by Brown, 2010:194) identifies this requirement as the greatest challenge of multi-grade teaching because it claims the structure of the curricula, the learning resources and assessment strategies employed in multi-grade teaching. Thus, the education process takes on a new shape and form from the single-grade situation.

Brown (2008:18) argues that another challenge faced by multi-grade teachers is that despite the apparent utility value of parental support in the education process, it seems that multi-grade teaching and teachers do not always find it easy to gain parents'

support. Multi-grade schools are typically regarded as being second-rate schools; schools that parents would not like their children to attend. According to Jordan and Joubert (2008:7) and Juana (2003), there is very little interest in multi-grade education on a global scale, and South Africa is no exception. Kyne (cited by Brown, 2008:35) points out that the instructional materials tend to be written for the mono-grade classroom.

1.6.8 Strategies to teach a multi-grade class

Berry (2001) argues that whole-class teaching approaches associated with mono-grade classrooms do not favour low-achieving learners. At the same time, while opportunities for heterogeneous group work in multi-grade classrooms appear to assist low achievers, they are less beneficial for high achievers. Therefore, approaches to instruction which address the needs of all levels of achievement in primary classrooms are required. Berry (2001) argues that strategies that can assist learners in multi-grade classes include cooperative group work.

Miller (1991) argues that skills in teaching multi-grade classes are required. He further indicates that if a teacher in either classroom fails to address differences among learners, the success of instruction suffers. Therefore, teachers are trained for many years in college to prepare them to work on the learner's abilities. On the other hand, Little (2004:13) describes curriculum adaptation strategies that are effective for multi-grade classroom arrangements. These strategies include multi-year curriculum spans, differentiated curricula, a quasi-mono-grade approach, a learner and material-centred arrangement, instructional resources, and timetables and routines (Little, 2004).

One of the best strategies to promote multi-grade teaching is by providing specialised, ongoing training, and a policy of training and recruiting teachers from local villages (Joubert, 2009). The Ownership Policy changes in relation to curriculum reform to alienate teachers from the reform efforts when teachers are not intimately involved in the reform process (Gower, 2010). With regards to policies on multi-grade teaching, it is important that teachers be involved and allowed to contribute to policy formulations with the encouragement of constantly contributing to solutions to school-based problems (Mahlala, 2010). Thus, developing countries must bear the harshness of

multi-grade teaching because it is a necessity and not a pedagogical choice, unlike in developed countries (Aksoy, 2008; Little, 2007). Multi-grade teaching is often regarded as necessary for providing people with education, irrespective of political landscapes. “This is a means of expanding access to education in poor countries” (Benveniste & Mc Ewan, 2000:31). In order to teach in a multi-grade classroom context, several conditions need to be addressed in order to make the teaching and learning setting beneficial for learners. Little (2004:13) suggests that policymakers should be aware of the multi-grade teaching reality and develop tailor-made multi-grade teaching conditions related to resources, lesson planning, curriculum, didactic materials, teacher preparation, and assessment strategies in collaboration with teachers.

The use of technology to enhance teaching and learning is non-existent in multi-grade schools. However, the use of technology can help teachers work with different levels of age and abilities in a classroom and significantly enhance the quality of teaching and learning in multi-grade classrooms. Strategies for the advancement of quality teaching and learning in multi-grade schools should extend beyond providing teacher development in multi-grade pedagogy to include the provision of essential resources, including innovative technology and Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) that will enhance the administration and management of the schools and the quality of teaching and learning.

The Ministerial Committee on School Governance (2005) report indicated that School Governing Bodies (SGBs) in disadvantaged communities often function poorly due to poverty and a lack of expertise and experience. Therefore, for many parents in rural and farming areas, sustained participation in SGBs is often difficult due to low literacy levels, a lack of time and indirect costs. Therefore, interventions should address this phenomenon to ensure that SGBs are capacitated to participate and contribute to the running of multi-grade schools.

Mulaudzi (2016) studied the challenges experienced by the teachers of multi-grade classes in primary schools at Nzhelele East Circuit. From this title, the study’s research question was: “What are the challenges experienced by multi-grade teachers in implementing the curriculum?” Participants confirmed that curriculum strategies used in multi-grade schools had been designed for mono-grade schools. It was revealed

that assessment in multi-grade schools does not accommodate two or three grades in the same classroom in such a limited time. The formation of subject committees has been revealed to be another major challenge since most schools have one teacher responsible for teaching one subject, e.g. maths, from Grades 4 to 7.

1.6.9 Solutions for multi-grade teaching

Multi-grade teachers should not be expected to merely adopt the general mono-grade system to their specific multi-grade teaching circumstances. Little (2004:13) argues that many policymakers, planners, professional support staff and the public at large are unaware of the extent of challenges and nature of the needs of multi-grade classes and teachers teaching these classes. Since curriculum, didactic materials, teacher preparation and assessment approaches are predicated on schools with mono-graded classes; many teachers are negative towards their role in a multi-grade classroom setting due to their challenges. Curricula premised on a single-graded structure must be adapted to meet the needs of the multi-grade classroom, which must be undertaken jointly by teachers and guided and supported by curriculum experts at a national level. The highest authority must sanction and validate this adaptation (Joubert, 2010).

With regard to the in-service training of teachers in a rural multi-grade classroom context, Mohlala (2010:31) emphasises the need for provincial and district officials to be trained in conducting in-service training in multi-grade teaching approaches for teachers. Gower (2010:30) states the importance of a national policy on rural multi-grade teaching to adapt the national curriculum statement in order to address the needs of teachers in schools with multi-grade classroom environments in rural settings. Teacher training at higher education institutions should include a module or component of a module on multi-grade teaching relating to the know-how on facilitating core content to learners within a multi-grade classroom context for optimal learning. This can be arranged by including a module on multi-grade teaching in all teacher training programmes (Joubert, 2010).

1.6.10 Gaps identified in previous studies

The gap between the current study and dissertation is that there are no clear solutions to the challenges that the multi-grade teachers are countering in the Foundation Phase. The study will close the gap by establishing other challenges teachers encounter in multi-grade classrooms and problem-solving at the end of the study. The study is important as it will reveal that much work still needs to be done for teachers in multi-grade classrooms. Multi-grade teaching entails more work in terms of planning and assessment. Teachers are also expected to do school administrative duties.

According to Brown (2008:13), teachers prefer single-grades because multi-grade classes mean more planning, preparation, organisation, and work. The lack of support is also one of the challenges experienced by multi-grade teachers. Multi-grade teachers don't have support from the government, e.g. training for methods or techniques for teaching multi-grade classrooms. The preliminary literature review shows that multi-grade teachers encounter several teaching challenges and need support in the form of knowledge and skills to teach in a multi-grade classroom effectively. This support should be provided through pre-and in-service training.

1.7 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Theories are conceptual structures that order skills about facts and help to better master the nature of the situation (Donnell et al., 2009:20) and are a set of beliefs, objectives and concepts that explain the world (Kruger & Nel, 2005:9). They also help teachers daily by pointing out the various learning surroundings and dictate the tasks needed for teachers to achieve their goals.

A theoretical framework requires a theory that the researcher chooses to guide the research. Sithwala (2014) defined a theoretical framework as a set of conceptual concepts from the same theory to explain an event in a particular research problem. In that regard, Bronfenbrenner's Social Ecological Systems Theory supported the study of a rural area where poverty and illiteracy prevail. The Ecological Systems Theory holds that a child's nature depends on the context they grow up in and their development in their relationship with others. Miller (2011) refers to the four systems

in Bronfenbrenner's Bio-Ecological Model of child development and how these complex interacting environmental contexts affect learning.

The microsystem was the level closest to the learner, where there were immediate face-to-face interactions with another person. This system concerned the immediate environment and affected learners' physical, social and psychological wellness. The mesosystem refers to the relationship between the learner, parents and teachers. This system influences how the child functions in the school environment while learning (Swart & Pettipher, 2005). Finally, the microsystem was the level closest to the learner, where there were immediate face-to-face interactions with another person.

1.8 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

1.8.1 Research design

An exploratory case study design was selected because of its dynamic and flexible research method for in-depth investigation of a complex social issue, in this case, the inclusive education system (Zainal, 2007:1). Based on the advantages articulated by Zainal, a case study was found suitable for the study to examine countering the challenges with multi-grade teaching of Foundation Phase teachers in the Joe Gqabi District, Eastern Cape Province. According to Brown (2008:10), a case study has the potential to present a humanistic, holistic comprehension of complex situations and is a distinctive valuable research tool of inquiry in social research. A case study is user-friendly, and it is a broad-based approach that could draw adequate and accurate information within a short space of time needed to answer the research questions (Mouton, 2012:23). A case study remains suitable in social science research studies involving human experiences because it has the potential to lead to the formulation of interesting explanations more than purely statistical surveys. Furthermore, case studies were flexible and utilised multiple resources; thus, helping the researcher to comprehensively explore research questions such as interviews, observations etc. (Heale & Twycross, 2018).

1.8.2 Research paradigm

The research paradigm depicted the way of notice, the society that supported the research topic and the influence thereof on researchers to trust the outcome of the study (Hughes, 2010:35). In this regard, the research paradigm represented a set of beliefs about how special challenges existed and a set of unity on how such problems can be investigated (Fraser & Robinson, 2004). A research paradigm also refers to the set of beliefs that manage action based on the researcher's perception of what knowledge and truth are. The exploratory interpretive paradigm guided this qualitative research study. This design was relevant for this study because the researcher collected data through interviews, observation and document analysis, and interpreted it and drew conclusions based on the findings.

1.8.3 Research approach

A qualitative research approach was applied to the study since collected data focused on information-rich participants' experiences of the phenomenon under study, namely multi-grade teaching. In line with Creswell (2009), a qualitative research approach allowed data collection and different understanding perspectives. Qualitative inquiry targeted a smaller focus group (a small group of people selected to represent different social classes/positions/sub-groups asked to discuss or give their opinions about a particular subject), allowing spontaneity from participants, which increased the efficiency of data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2009). Qualitative research was highly flexible compared to quantitative research because it posed open-ended questions to prompt enough information from participants, as opposed to quantitative research with fixed or closed and identical questions. In the qualitative approach, the researcher interacted with the participants, and the relationship was less formal between the researcher and participants. Under those circumstances, undesirable reactions like anxiety and uncertainties were minimised, and the researcher attended to clarifications immediately (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005:34).

1.8.3.1 Population of the study

A population is a group of elements that comprise characteristics of interest to a researcher and who meet the specific characteristics that a researcher has predetermined (Polit & Beck, 2009). Babbie and Mouton (2009) support this by noting that a population is a group or collection that a researcher is interested in. Burns and Grove (2009) refer to a sample as a subset of the population selected to represent the population.

Gray (2004) describes a population as the complete number of achievable units that are included in the study. Vos, Strydom and Delpont (2005) define a population as the total set of possibilities from which a unit is chosen for study. A sample represents a small part of the population that the researcher is interested in researching. In contrast, sampling represents the process of selecting a few individuals for a study in such a way that they represent the larger group from which they are selected (Babbie & Mouton, 2010). In the Joe Gqabi District of Education, there are 40 primary schools with more than ten primary schools involved in multi-grade teaching. In the research population, four primary schools were selected as research sites. The Foundation Phase multi-grade teachers, HoDs and principals participated in this study.

1.8.3.2 Sampling

The study adopted purposive sampling. Sampling entails intentionally choosing an element from the whole population to learn more about the phenomenon being studied. Sampling implies the process of selecting from a larger population and group about which generalised statements are made with the selected part representing the total group (Holloway & Wheeler, 2010). The selection of participants was based on purposeful sampling to ensure that information-rich individuals were selected to contribute to data gathering.

According to McMillan and Schumacher (2006), purposeful sampling involves selecting information-rich subjects to represent the complete phenomenon of study, contributing to understanding the situation without requiring studying all the cases. Purposeful sampling expands the utility of information obtained from a small sample.

It requires information about differences among the sub-units before the sample is chosen. The population of this study includes all the primary schools in the Joe Gqabi District of Education in the Eastern Cape. However, the study sample consisted of eight multi-grade teachers in each selected school, four (4) school principals, and four (4) HoDs. Thus, a total of sixteen (16) participants took part in this study.

1.8.4 Data collection

Data collection is the process of gathering and measuring information on variables of interest in an established systematic fashion that enables one to answer stated research questions, test hypotheses, and evaluate outcomes. Data collection is the process of gathering and measuring information on variables of interest in an established systematic fashion that enables one to answer stated research questions, test hypotheses, and evaluate outcomes. The data collection component of research is common to all fields of study, including physical and social sciences, humanities, business, etc. While methods vary by discipline, the emphasis on ensuring accurate and honest collection remains the same (Mukherji, 2015).

The data collection instruments used in this study comprised semi-structured interviews, document analysis and observation – these are briefly discussed in this chapter. Each research method had advantages and disadvantages, and certain procedures were more applicable than others to answer the formulated research question (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006).

1.8.4.1 Interview

Neuwenhuis (2007) defines an interview as a “two-way conversation in which the interviewer asks participants questions to collect data and to learn about ideas, beliefs, views, opinions and behaviours of participants.” In this study, it is believed that the interviews were a suitable method that allowed the researcher to interrogate the participants. Cohen et al., (2007) contend that an interview enables the interviewer and interviewee to discuss their interpretation of the world in which they live and to express how they regard situations from their point of view. De Vos, Strydom, Fouche and Delport (2011) argue that an interview is regarded as a social relationship

designed to exchange information between the participant and the researcher with the purpose of ensuring clarity.

Furthermore, individual interviews and a case study design were compatible when conducting a study based on a claim that “from an interpretivist perspective, the typical characteristic of a case study was that they strived towards a comprehensive understanding of how participants relate and interact with each other in a specific situation and how they make meaning of a phenomenon under study” (Niewenhuis, 2007). During the Individual Interview (II) process, there was an interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee. It is believed that it is one of the strategies in which the two parties start getting to know each other and develop confidence. For the researcher, this method helped build strong proximity with the participants. In addition, it enabled the researcher to develop the nature of rapport necessary to collect rich data.

The second data generation method used was the focus group interviews. The purpose of employing the focus group interviews (FGI) was to gather all the principals of sampled schools to discuss some crucial issues and share their experiences around the research topic. This correlates with a focus group interview defined by McMillan and Schumacher (2010) as the involvement of a small homogeneous group gathered to study an issue affecting them. The focus group interviews contributed positively to the research study because they allowed participants to raise issues that were not generated during the interviews.

The researcher also conducted in-depth individual interviews. According to McMillan and Schumacher (2006), individual interviewing based on a semi-structured questioning approach provides meaningful prompts to delve deeper for improved insight into the phenomenon of study. Therefore, a semi-structured approach representing open-ended questioning provided opportunities for creative contributions while interviewing remained fairly specific in its goal. In addition, in-depth individual and focus group interviews enabled the researcher to collect data from information-rich research participants.

1.8.4.2 Observation

An observation is referred to as the actions of gathering data through the researcher observing situations and noting these observations by referencing a checklist encapsulating the predetermined relevant actions to observe (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). For example, the researcher observed how teachers present their lessons in multi-grade classrooms. This data collection method assisted in collecting data on how learners of different grade levels are taught in the same classroom during the same lesson by the same teacher. During lesson observation, the challenges encountered by Foundation Phase teachers with multi-grade teaching were visible as they were present in real-life conditions.

1.8.4.3 Data analysis

Qualitative data analysis entails the process of ordering data into groups and indicating patterns around classification, ensuring that it is systematically and logically arranged (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). According to Creswell (2009), data analysis requires activities pertaining to drawing up steps, conducting different analyses, operations to ensure the correct understanding of data, presenting the data systematically, and making interpretations of the systematically analysed data. Finally, the most salient characteristics of the data were analysed and interpreted as research findings (Creswell, 2009).

1.9 CREDIBILITY AND TRUSTWORTHINESS

Credibility refers to a plan of how the research was conducted. Thus, the research achieved credibility through prolonged engagement with the participants after the interviews and observation (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Granneheim and Lundman (2012) state that credibility is established when the research findings represent plausible information drawn from the participants' original data with the correct interpretation of their views. In this study, the researcher reflected on credibility by playing the recording of the interviews to the participants for approval before data analysis and interpretation.

Trustworthiness is the level of belief in data, interpretation, and technique used to ensure the quality of a study. It requires that researchers set up agreements and plans of action to be reviewed and worthy of consideration by readers (Connelly et al., 2016; Pilot & Beck, 2014). Furthermore, trustworthiness represents validity in qualitative designs and is the level to which explanations have mutual meaning between participants and researchers (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). Creswell (2009) stated that trustworthiness represents the solidity of qualitative research. It is based on checking whether the findings are correct from the researcher's viewpoint, participants, and readers.

1.10 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

According to Johnson and Christensen (2012), ethics were ideas and orders to confirm the preservation of others. Therefore, with research endeavour, an ethical agreement must be noticed by sustaining the principles of society and maintaining professional conduct regarding the fair treatment of research participants. In this study, the research agreement was arranged through written permission from education authorities at the provincial and school levels and from participants individually.

All learners completed assent forms signed by their parent or guardian for the classroom observation, and all teachers completed consent forms. Consent pertains to participants agreeing to be selected to participate in a study (Drew, 2007). The researcher's responsibility was to ensure that the participants had a clear understanding of the purpose of the study, the methods used in the study, and the possible risks for the participants (Best & Kahn, 2006). To ensure privacy, Foundation Phase teachers participating in the study were provided with labels to remain anonymous.

Participants were informed about the purpose of the study. Participation was optional, with the right to terminate participation at any stage of the study. Confidentiality and anonymity were explained to candidates and confirmed in writing as part of the consent letter. The researcher was sensitised to not affecting normal school-day

activities; thus, the researcher scheduled interviews before and after the normal school day and remained unobtrusive during the interviews.

1.10.1 Limitations of the study

The first limitation of the study was that the sample only consisted of female teachers, as most Foundation Phase teachers were female (a few male participants were available). The study's population comprised government primary schools with multi-grade classes in the Joe Gqabi District. Some study participants were not available every day for observation and focus group interviewing due to sick leave or other personal reasons. Secondly, the researcher could not spend much time at the schools as she is a full-time teacher in a multi-grade teaching school. Thirdly, the researcher did not receive any policy documentation regarding multi-grade from two participating schools. Thus, the researcher could only deduce what was stated in the policies or whether any policies existed based on the responses given during the interview process.

1.10.2 Delimitations of the study

The study was limited to three primary schools in the Sterkspruit rural area/farm area in the Eastern Cape Province that practice multi-grade teaching. These multi-grade teachers were preferred because the schools have a long history of arranging learners on a multi-grade basis. Secondly, these schools are within reasonable distance to a higher education institution located in Sterkspruit, which they may access to enhance their professional development needs. This was done by sampling three multi-grade teachers from each school; therefore, a total of nine teachers participated in the study. Moreover, the study was conducted in the Joe Gqabi District in the Eastern Cape Province; thus, representing a relatively small sample with limited possibilities to generalise the findings.

1.11 CLARIFICATION OF KEY CONCEPTS

1.11.1 Multi-grade teaching

Multi-grade teaching is when a different group of learners with different cognitive levels are supervised and taught by one teacher simultaneously and in the same classroom. According to Joubert (2010), it is the teaching of children of different grade levels simultaneously in the same setting. Multi-grade teaching is when teachers teach two or more official grade levels of learners in one class. However, multi-grade teaching is not universal, but the practice is widespread.

1.11.2 Foundation Phase teachers

Foundation Phase teachers are the first to formally assist children in developing their thinking skills in the school phase spanning from Grade R (reception) to Grade 3. They are also responsible for helping children to develop their thinking skills. They teach from Grade R (reception) through to Grade 3. Foundation Phase teachers promote the child's social, emotional, intellectual, and physical development (Jobbert, 2010).

1.11.3 Classroom management

Classroom management ensures that teaching and learning proceed constructively without being disrupted by undisciplined learners or other actions and conditions. According to Tan (2011), classroom management represents teachers' good conduct and wise decisions to facilitate their learners' meaningful learning process. In addition, classroom management refers to activities necessary to create and maintain an orderly learning environment, such as planning and preparing teaching and learning materials, organising teaching and learning activities, decorating the classroom, and establishing and enforcing routines and rules (Tan, 2011).

1.12 DIVISION OF CHAPTERS

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Chapter one outlined the background and rationale for the study and explained the research problem with related research questions and research aims. Discussions on the trustworthiness of the findings and adherence were made.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Chapter 2 presents literature related to the challenges encountered by Foundation Phase teachers in multi-grade teaching environments in terms of classroom management and learner-centred teaching approaches. Multi-grade teaching was reviewed from a national and international perspective. Moreover, the chapter commenced with a discussion of the theoretical framework underlying this study, which served as a lens to interpret the research outcomes.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents the research methodology for the study. It elaborates on the research design, research sample, data collection and data analysis techniques, ethical considerations, and trustworthiness of the research findings.

CHAPTER 4: DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATIONS

Chapter 4 encapsulates the analysis and interpretation of data to achieve research findings that will answer the formulated research questions. Data collected through interviews, observation and document analysis were analysed.

CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY, FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The last chapter summarises the research findings from the literature review and the empirical investigation from which conclusions are deduced. Furthermore, recommendations for future research possibilities are put forward.

1.13 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter introduced the challenges with multi-grade teaching of Foundation Phase teachers in the Joe Gqabi District, Eastern Cape Province. The study also explores the views of a Foundation Phase district education subject advisor regarding the issues raised by multi-grade teachers. The researcher outlined the aims and objectives, including the assumptions and significance of the study. In addition, the literature review, theoretical framework, research methodology and research design were discussed.

Chapter 2 presents the conceptual framework and related literature regarding the challenges of multi-grade Foundation Phase teachers in multi-grade settings.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 INTRODUCTION

This dissertation is structured into various chapters, sections and sub-sections. Firstly, it has an introductory chapter that introduces the research. It is followed by a section describing the research title's background. Thereafter, a statement that describes the research problem follows. The previous chapters and/or sections will be followed by the following sub-sections: research questions, sub-research questions, and the aims and objectives of the study. The second chapter focused on literature review, which involved citing published and unpublished literature on related published and unpublished studies. The following sections succeeded this: theoretical framework; methodology and design used in the study; paradigm and approach adopted in the research study; description of how the population and sampling were chosen and/or carried out; how data were collected as well as the software used to analyse it; the credibility and trustworthiness of the research; ethical considerations made in conducting the research; limitations and delimitations of the study; clarification of key concepts; and a summary of the previous chapter.

Chapter 2 aimed to provide literature background with regard to multi-grade teaching. It outlined components of multi-grade teaching in the South African context and multi-grade teaching from global perspectives. In particular, it focused on challenges experienced by teachers who teach in the Foundation Phase in selected schools in the Joe Gqabi District. The literature background was aimed at answering one of this study's research questions: What strategies could Foundation Phase teachers use to counter multi-grade teaching challenges? Furthermore, the second chapter explored the theoretical framework regarding challenges encountered by teachers that teach at the Foundation Phase in a multi-grade classroom.

2.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The current research is conducted in a rural area where poverty and illiteracy prevail; therefore, social and cultural constructs must be carefully considered. The study is underpinned by Bronfenbrenner's Social Ecological Systems Theory, with regard to addressing challenges encountered by Foundation Phase teachers in multi-grade classrooms (Miller, 2011).

2.2.1 Definition of 'theory'

According to Creswell and Poth (2017), the term 'theory' refers to a plan or concept that gives a clear understanding of the relationship amongst the elements. Theory can be used to describe a direct and positive interaction that can exist between humans and the universe that they inhabit. On the other hand, other authors expanded the definition and coined the term 'educational theory' and defined it as a dual investigation that concerns theory and methodology involving workplaces ought to comprehend and interpret experiences of the world (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). This study was guided by the Multi-Grade Teaching Theory based on Bronfenbrenner's Theory. This theory was selected because it proved significant to the researcher, particularly regarding discussing the study's findings.

2.2.2 The importance of a theoretical framework

Globally speaking, like most theories applied in research, the theoretical framework is considered among the leading and important components of research. The phrase has been defined by various authors and/or scholars, including Grant and Osanloo (2014), who affirmed that it remains crucial in the research process, despite it being misconstrued at times. Overall, a theoretical framework affirms academic research by offering enhanced academic standards and clearly defined scholastic functions. In particular, it provides clarity on language, concepts, and assumptions to enable researchers to better understand the phenomena they would be investigating. Various authors, including Kuada (2012), confirm this view, stating that the theoretical framework enables researchers to connect concepts. Also in agreement is Tredoux (2020), who describes it as aimed at representing the theoretical optic used to describe academic research results.

2.2.3 Bronfenbrenner's Theory

As indicated in the preceding sections, Bronfenbrenner's theory guided this study's framework. The theory is adopted in order to enable a researcher to understand multi-grade teaching, the different social contexts in which learners taught under this approach find themselves, and the interactions involved in a long-term face-to-face relationship between teachers, all vital in a child's development (Donald, 2006).

Bronfenbrenner's Theory is suitable for this study because a child's development ought to be understood in relation to different systems, namely the microsystem, ecosystem and macro-system (Miller, 2011). These interconnected systems are interrelated and ensure that learners learn to write, among other factors. In the context of a level closest to the learner (microsystem), it involves immediate face-to-face writing interactions with another person. It consists of a mesosystem that embeds a learner, family and school. By contrast, the furthest level (macrosystem) generally impacts the cultural belief systems about writing. As acknowledged by Smagorinsky (2018), it can be said that Vygotsky's Theory, which involves scaffolding, also relates to this study in that it applies to diverse learners as that of multi-grade classes.

On the other hand, Guy-Evans (2020) describes a microsystem as the most influential level of the Ecological Systems Theory. It is a system in which the child's development is immediately involved in family and school environmental settings. In addition, microsystems involve a child's interconnection with other familiar people, such as a family member, a sibling or a friend from their peer group. These interactions serve as examples of the functioning of roles and routines of daily activities that shape the child's holistic development. For example, children that lack support from their family microsystems may seek support and guidance from teachers. The microsystem is also a level closest to the learner, where there are instant face-to-face interactions with another person. This system is concerned with the immediate environment and affects learners' physical, social, and mental well-being. According to Santrock (2012), a microsystem in Bronfenbrenner's Theory involves a setting concerned with an individual's life and contexts, such as family, peers, school, and neighbourhood. Furthermore, Paquette and Ryan (2010) declare that the microsystem is the layer

closest to the individual and contains the construction with which the individual has direct contact.

Barbara (2020) describes a mesosystem as interrelations among two or more settings where the developing person actively participates. However, at times, the demands of one setting, such as work, may require so much time and effort that a person may be unable to meet expectations in another setting. Barbara and Philip (2020) noted that an exosystem involves developing a person in events that affect or are affected by what happens in a setting containing the developing person. On the other hand, Bronfenbrenner (2011) believes that an exosystem involves one or more settings that exclude the active participation of the learner instead of in which events occur.

Santrock (2002) argues that the ecosystem is involved when experiences in another social setting in which the individual does not have an active role influence in what they experience in an immediate context. Therefore, the exosystem defines the larger social system in which the individual does not function directly (Paquette & Ryan, 2001). The exosystem comprises the connections and processes that take place between two or more settings, at least one of which does not contain the developing person, but in which events occur that indirectly influence processes within the immediate setting in which the developing person lives, such as the relationship between the home and the parents' workplace (Bronfenbrenner, 2011).

The macro-system consists of the larger cultural world surrounding learners with underlying belief systems, such as direct government policies, political ideology, cultural customs and beliefs, historical events and the economic system (Duerden & Witt, 2010). Macrosystem functioning refers to powerful social and economic structures at work in the society in which the child develops. For example, the allocation of human and financial resources to schools by the DoE influences the kind of education provided to the child. As time changes, a child's relationships with the different people and groupings of people, contexts and the child's need for teacher demand and supply also change (Duerden & Witt, 2010). The macro-system is the level furthest from the learner that impacts the general cultural belief systems, including democracy, social justice, equity, equality and freedom of discrimination. Social factors such as poverty and discrimination, evident in this study, are important

factors when considering the challenges teachers experience when teaching writing (Swart & Phasha, 2005). The macro-system is considered to be the outermost layer in the individual's environment and involves the culture in which individuals live (Santrock, 2002). The macro-system in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory involves the culture in which individuals live, which refers to the behaviour patterns, beliefs, and all other products of a group of people that are passed on from generation to generation (Santrock, 2002).

Therefore, in the context of this study, the teaching and learning situation is influenced by Urie Bronfenbrenner's Theory, for example, the availability of resources at home and at school, values regarding achievement and perseverance, and the level of support from the government. Bronfenbrenner's framework allows an exploration of multi-grade teaching challenges as being about the development of systems and individuals within these systems (Singal, 2006). Identifying the interconnectedness within and between these systems facilitates a better understanding of schools with multi-grade classrooms. Learners in this study are from poor rural backgrounds; thus, their schooling experience differs from privileged urban learners in the same stage of Piaget's development. This affects how the child functions in the school environment while learning (Swart & Pettipher, 2005). Factors such as poverty, shortage of classrooms, and lack of discipline affect learners' academic performance (Swart & Phasha, 2008).

The Montessori Educational Theory also guided this study, a theoretical framework that is learner-oriented and characterised by mixed-aged learners supported with specialised educational materials (Schilling, 2011; Al, Sari & Kahya, 2012). Furthermore, the aforementioned educational materials are developed as guided by the specific developmental needs of learners (Lillard, 2008). Therefore, approaches such as the widespread use of resources interlinked with independent learning associated with the Montessori Educational Theory motivated its selection and relevance for this study.

2.3 THE NATURE OF THE LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter provided a review of published literature on multi-grade teaching. Specifically, the literature described multi-grade settings that are considered challenging, particularly for teachers and learners. In addition, the literature review focused on suggested solutions that could mitigate some of the challenges to improving teaching and learning in multi-grade classrooms.

The literature background indicates that multi-grade education is one of the common topics on the agenda of most working groups in the teaching profession. This is primarily because the system is associated with multiple challenges that compromise the work of teachers (Quail & Smyth, 2014). For example, multi-grade teachers in Turkey are expected to meet the needs of learners of mixed-age classes (Dogan, Çapan, & Cigerci, 2020).

Multi-grade systems are a significant occurrence in countryside schools and serve indigent populations that are largely side-lined. Therefore, addressing its challenges, especially in the South African context, could contribute to achieving education goals for all and millennium development goals. It was on this background that the researcher saw the need to conduct this research study with the aim to contribute knowledge on multi-grade schools located in a remote area of the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa.

2.3.1 The concept of multi-grade teaching

Brunswick and Valerien (2004) provide a definition for multi-grade learning, which is suitable for this research. They are of the view that the concept involves teaching where a single teacher teaches learners of different ages, grades, and curricula. Checchi and De Paola (2018) describe multi-grade classes as two different grades located in the same classroom to be taught by one teacher. Paola (2018) also reported the reluctance of most teachers in rural schools to adopt multi-grade teaching. This strategy is commonly used in many countries that are developed and developing. Brown (2008) distinguishes it from mono-grade teaching, in which learners within the same grade are assumed to be similar in age and ability. However, these definitions are suitable because this research study involved sampling schools comprising

learners of different ages and grades, with different curricula combined and taught by a single teacher.

In 2015, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) defined multi-grade teaching as the simultaneous teaching of learners of different grades in the same classroom. This latter definition contrasts Brunswick and Valerien (2004) and Priyatruk (2013). A UNESCO (2015) report revealed that while teachers were initially not keen to teach in a multi-grade classroom, their attitudes changed. They were becoming more positive, particularly after mastering the strategies required to improve learner performance and handle the increased workload. However, despite the slight changes in attitude, most teachers across the world still struggle to understand and are therefore reluctant to accept multi-grade education. As shown by Bua and Martin (2020) in Nepal, a new and relevant strategy was needed in order to efficiently teach learners of different grades and ages in one class.

Intriguingly, multi-grade classrooms typically accommodate and/or allow for fewer learners in each class. Experience has shown that this makes it difficult for teachers to conduct the necessary teaching and learning activities. Furthermore, learners display a lack of motivation and interest in their learning. In response to these concerns, the Ministry of Education officially introduced the concept of 'multi-grade teaching' (MGT) (DoE, 2017). It involves assigning the responsibility of teaching two or more groups or classrooms in the same classroom to one teacher (Hargreaves, 2001; Quail & Smyth, 2014). Joubert (2010) explains that the terms 'combination classes', 'forced mixed-age classes' and 'forced mixed grade' included in the definition of MGT usually incorporate necessary settings and are brought about by the need for enrolment. MGT enables children who would otherwise not be able to afford or have the education to attend school. This approach explains why society sees MGT as a "second class" education. The affordability of MGT has led to some countries having to build more classrooms and hire more teachers. However, there are cases where schools with low enrolment are closed, leading to situations where children are forced to enrol in larger schools that are further away from their homes (UNESCO, 2015).

Multi-grade class teaching is defined as two or more grade groups taught together by a teacher in the same classroom (Quail & Smyth 2014). According to Hargreaves (2001), multi-grade classes are classes where one teacher is responsible for two or more grades or classes of learners simultaneously. There are instances where the concept applies to a school, suggesting that there are multi-grade schools. For example, it is a small school that enrolls learners of multiple ages and grade levels but typically has one classroom taught by a single teacher (McEwan, 2012). Under such circumstances, learners of the different grades are taught in the same classroom simultaneously under the guidance of one teacher (Hargreaves, Montero, Chau, Sibli & Thanh, 2001). Overall, while multiple definitions of Multi-Grade Teaching (MGT) exist, each includes common phrases such as ‘a single teacher’, ‘more than two different grades’, ‘a single classroom’, and ‘simultaneous’.

2.3.2 International perspective on multi-grade teaching

As confirmed by UNESCO (2015), in many cases of these developing countries, MGT is a means of schooling for children who otherwise would not be able to have an education. For this reason, many teachers and parents often perceive MGT as “second class” instead of quality education. Consequently, countries usually attempt to build more classrooms and hire more teachers. In the worst scenarios, the small schools are closed, and children are forced to travel long distances to larger schools (UNESCO, 2015).

In MGT classrooms, learners assume more responsibilities because they learn to be independent while being cooperative. However, in cases where independence and cooperation are non-existent, the MGT cannot be implemented effectively (Brown, 2010). As with most systems, teachers encounter challenges with multi-grade classrooms, including struggling to maintain professional and social isolation, lack of resources, infrequent supervision, and poor living conditions (Berry, 2010).

2.3.3 Multi-grade teaching in developed countries

Given the multiple constraints encountered in implementing multi-grade education, researchers have documented how schools in developing countries cope with the

system. While governments implement multi-grade classrooms to ensure that underprivileged children access education, the system is synonymous with isolated, poor, and predominantly indigenous populations (Hargreaves, Montero, Chau, Sibl & Thanh, 2001). It should be noted that some underdeveloped and developing countries adopt the multi-grade approach because of challenging economic situations coupled with unfavourable landscapes (Miller, 1989). A typical example of such a country is Myanmar, where the system is so widespread that almost half of the country's primary schools are reportedly multi-grade, and teachers teach more than 1,645 learners simultaneously (Hardman et al., 2014).

Moreover, some areas in BC prefer multi-grade teaching over mono-grade teaching because the former ensures flexibility and promotes cooperative and individualised learning (Luschei & Zubaidah, 2012). In 2012, one of the provinces of the BC had an estimated 166 multi-grade standard public schools (BC Ministry of Education, 2013). However, poor planning and implementation of multi-grade schooling hamper positive learning outcomes. In some cases, a curriculum designed for mono-grade schooling in multi-grade schools is used (Little, 2005).

Some countries have devised means to address the sparingly available/accessible resources associated with multi-grade school systems. One such country is the BC, where locally-made materials are used to address the shortage and lack of resources for multi-grade schools. In addition, countries can be made aware of the challenges multi-grade schools face through the collection and reporting of data. Indeed, some institutions have found ways to collect data on the curriculum and performance of learners in multi-grade schools. For instance, the Campbell River School District (SD 72) re-organised the BC math curriculum into multi-grade charts highlighting the common skills taught in each grade and the small increment of growth targeted for each grade level. Similarly, the author of this paper has re-worked the 2007 BC Language Arts Curriculum (K-7) into a "multi-grade friendly format."

In order to ascertain whether a school is multi-grade, the Ministry of Education in BC uses the ratio of school enrolment to the number of grades taught. This approach assumes that a school consists of multi-grade classrooms where the ratio is equal to or less than 15 learners per grade level. However, one of the shortfalls of this method

is that it does not identify the accurate number of multi-grade classes within each school. Also, it lacks precise details on whether multi-grade classes exist within mid-to-large elementary and high schools. Therefore, there is a need for comprehensive data on these, particularly in the BC, because it comprises many private, alternative, and federally-funded band multi-grade schools.

2.3.4 Causes of multi-grade teaching

Many reasons lead to the establishment of a multi-grade school or classroom. Although teachers and policymakers make a decision of this nature; however, the set-up can be necessitated by a shortage of learners and teachers (Little, 2010). The shortage of teachers and learners is prevalent in villages and could explain why multi-grade set-up is common. Furthermore, it explains the existence of many multi-grade settings in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa, particularly in schools located on farms, where schools selected to participate in this study was based.

Mathot (2011) identifies the shortage of resources as a reason for resorting to multi-grade classrooms. South Africa has no policy standardising which grades are combined (Brown, 2008). Valerien (2004) maintains that multi-grade teaching is often established out of necessity. The reasons may be based on economic, social, political, or demographic circumstances (low population density, resulting from rural-urban migration).

2.3.5 Factors contributing to multi-grade teaching

Over the past decades, while developing countries have had to contend with the legacy of urbanisation, some have had to mitigate its consequences. One of its consequences is the depletion of the human population in rural areas, which is closely associated with significantly reducing learners. Therefore, the ongoing migration of humans from rural to urban areas has contributed to multi-grade schooling. As a result, schools in rural and remote areas are faced with multi-grade teaching and learning (Kucita, 2012).

Ramrathan and Ngubane (2013) suggest that teachers should not be challenged by multi-grade systems because of their professionalism and ability to adjust. In reality, implanting the system reportedly causes some teachers and principals psychological stress and other health issues. The system also tends to blame the principals, who ought to carry out their daily duties that have nothing or little to do with addressing multi-grade classes. In the South African context, multi-grade schooling is also constrained by the use of incompatible curricula and policy documents designed for mono-grade classrooms (Msimanga, 2016; Tredoux, 2020). In order to address this challenge, particularly in mixed grades classrooms, some teachers resort to teaching one grade at a time while the other grade does activities (Lekgothoane & Thobejane 2017). Moreover, the challenges afflicting multi-grade classes in South Africa are partly caused by a lack of policies that deal with the approach, shortage of educational materials meant to facilitate learning and teaching through technologies, lack of specialised pedagogical content knowledge by teachers, and lack of specialised training programmes for multi-grade teaching at tertiary institutions (Spaull, 2012; Gasa, 2016; Nkadimene, 2019).

The relevant department should have addressed the previously highlighted challenges facing South African multi-grade schooling. However, reports show that the Department of Basic Education and school leadership ignore these (Thaba-Nkadimene et al., 2019). This explains why some authors conclude that the multi-grade system in South Africa is deemed to fail and is doomed (Taole & Mcube, 2012). A solution to the lack of specialised pedagogical content among multi-grade teachers is that the DBE collaborate with tertiary institutions to design and implement a multi-grade embedded teacher education curriculum.

2.3.6 Strategies to alleviate the challenges of teaching multi-grade classrooms.

It is intriguing that despite being common, most challenges facing the multi-grade system are unknown to policymakers, planners, professional support staff, and the public at large Little (2004) stated that there is a reason for establishing multi-grade schools or classrooms and teachers and policymakers took a decision of this nature. Little (2004) recommends efforts to ensure that policymakers are aware of the challenges of multi-grade teaching. This could result in delivering relevant resources,

lesson planning, curriculum, material, and teacher preparation and assessment strategies. Furthermore, since the curricula designed for mono-grade classrooms are used in multi-grade classes, they should be altered to meet the needs of multi-grade classes. Policymakers should make such alterations with the cooperation of teachers and curriculum experts, and the adaptations should be permitted and validated by the highest authority (Joubert, 2010).

2.3.7 Multi-grade teaching in South Africa

In South Africa, multi-grade teaching is viewed differently than in other countries across the globe. First, South Africa adopts the system when fewer learners are registered and do not meet the number required to form a grade (Lindstrom & Lindohll, 2011). Multi-grade teaching is practised in about 27% of schools (comprising 7 000), with the majority located in the remote countryside (CEPD, 2011:18; Joubert, 2010:58; Vinjevold & Schinder, 1997:2). Of the rural provinces that host such a system, Limpopo, Eastern Cape, and KwaZulu-Natal are home to a more significant percentage of multi-grade schools (CEPD, 2010:18). It is commendable that over the years, the Department of Basic Education has made significant strides to reduce the number of multi-grade schools in the Free State and Mpumalanga Provinces (CEPD, 2010:18). Like the rest of the world, South African teachers lack the requisite training in multi-grade education. Instead, they are trained in mono-grade teaching (Barrett et al., 2007, Chiu & Khoo, 2005, Hanushek & Woman, 2007).

2.3.8 Challenges encountered by the teacher in multi-grade teaching

In multi-grade schooling, first, teachers teach groups using the same approach as a mono-graded system. Second, learners are given the curriculum with the expectation that they would study independently with minimal support from the teacher and organised assessment tasks. Third, the system anticipates that there could be a relationship between learners, teachers, and learning materials. Fourth, the department's resources are neither sufficient nor suitable, and the timetable is incompatible (Joubert, 2010).

2.3.9 How to reduce challenges of multi-grade teaching

In order to understand how to address challenges that afflict multi-grade schools, it is crucial to understand what leads to the challenges. These include the scarcity of schools in underdeveloped countries, inadequate human resources, insufficient teaching and learning resources, teacher and learner absenteeism, and a lack of school infrastructure hamper effective learning and high levels of poverty, unemployment and diseases. This suggests that children enter primary education at an older age than the approved age, or there is lack of extra-and co-curricular activities to capture learners' interest and develop their capabilities, a lack of parental involvement, parents' indifference, low teacher morale, underqualified teachers, and learner absenteeism (Smit & Humpert, 2012; Letsekha, Wiebesiek-Pienaar & Meyiwa, 2014; Mulcahy, 2007; Brown, 2010); Ramrathan & Ngubane, 2013).

According to published literature, the most common challenges afflicting multi-grade classrooms include unqualified teachers with a lack of work experience; learners experiencing difficulty in writing, lack of organisation in classrooms, poor working environment, lack of financial support, unsuitability of textbooks for multi-grade schools, and insufficient time (Yerlikaya, 2000; Mulryan-Kyne, 2004; Blease, & Condy, 2015; Sampson, & Condy, 2016; Msimanga, 2020).

To address some of these challenges, teachers design lessons for respective classes; group learners to save and manage time properly, share part of their earnings and resources with learners; find commonalities among learners, frequent electric power and water outages, sewer blockages and heating problems, and encourage advanced learners to help their classmates (Hry-Beihammer & Hascher, 2015; Castigador, 2019; Msimanga, 2019; Casserly, Tiernan & Maguire, 2019).

When these challenges are not addressed, it increases teachers' workload tremendously, forcing teachers to leave multi-grade schools and affecting their confidence in the system (Aikman & Pridmore, 2001; Smit & Engeli, 2015; Jenkins & Cornish, 2015; Nasir ul Haq, 2017). Unfortunately, most of the challenges faced by multi-grade schools are not addressed, which has led to authors suggesting that the system be discontinued as it is ineffective, offers inferior education, and negatively

impacts the learners' intellectual ability (Brown, 2010; Nasir ul Haq, 2017; Lindström & Lindahl, 2011).

Recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has had adverse effects on multi-grade teaching, particularly where lessons had to be offered through online platforms (Eşici, Ayaz, Yetim, Çağlar & Bedir, 2021). Specifically, teachers indicated that they required psychological support, support for in-service training, better internet infrastructure, and improved efficiency or network coverage in order for them to teach during the pandemic (Arslan & Şumuer, 2020; Leech, Gullett, Cummings & Haug, 2020). On the other hand, teachers also reported challenges when lessons had to be offered in-person. These were primarily related to social distancing where learners did not consistently abide by the COVID-19 rules, in class and outside. The cause of poor adherence to the rules and regulations in class was because the classes were smaller and had to accommodate socially-distanced learners.

There is a need for more extensive research regarding the effects of the pandemic on educational systems. However, more is needed because published research focuses on teachers' perceptions and experiences during the pandemic (Karahan, Bozan & Akçay, 2020; Sönmez, Yıldırım & Çetinkaya, 2020; Kantos, 2020). Furthermore, some studies examined the views of pre-service teachers, parents and students (Duban & Şen, 2020; Yurtbakan & Akyıldız, 2020; Yolcu, 2020). However, there is a dearth of published literature on the challenges teachers of multi-grade classes face during the pandemic. Specifically, research on how the obligatory use of distance education has affected multi-grade classes during the pandemic is insufficient, particularly in the South African context.

2.3.10 Effects of multi-grade teaching on learners' performance

According to Linstrom and Lindahl (2011), the Swedish National Agency for Education favours multi-age classes as they have been found to positively affect learners' intellectual development. Furthermore, peer tutoring plays a crucial role in the multi-grade classroom where learners work in groups according to their intellectual abilities rather than focusing on age cohort as prioritised in monograde class.

Finally, individual attention is a priority in multi-age classes to assist poor-performing learners, which is difficult to provide in mono-grade classes (Balfour, 2015). Learners in multi-age classes benefit from more contact time, particularly those with learning difficulties. This suggests that teachers of multi-grade classes need to organise learners into small groups to benefit poor-performing learners.

It is also likely that older learners will compete with younger learners and will; thus, ensure that their performance is optimal at all times (Proehl, Douglas, Elias, Johnson & Westsmith, 2013). Checchi and De Paola (2018) and others investigated the cognitive and non-cognitive effects of multi-grade teaching in rural contexts. The reluctance of most teachers to adopt multi-grade teaching is informed by their view that the system is a second-rate teaching approach. Mainstream schools' views are based on the fact that they are yet to be trained or under proper training in multi-grade teaching. However, research shows no significant differences between mono-grade and multi-grade teaching regarding achievements. By contrast, multi-grade teaching exhibits enhanced learner outcomes when implemented effectively (Vithanapathirana, 2005). Interestingly, there are many reports on the performance of learners taught under the multi-grade system (Combrinck, 2011). Of these reports, Kamal (2010) highlighted a positive correlation between non-cognitive skills. In fact, learners taught in multi-grade classrooms exhibit superior outcomes on non-cognitive achievements compared to their mono-grade counterparts. On the other hand, some published literature revealed little or no differences between the achievements of multi-grade teaching and its counterpart.

2.3.11 Challenges in multi-grade teaching

Without a doubt, most multi-grade schools, particularly those in developing countries, face various challenges. Taole and Mncube (2012) suggest that the many challenges constraining multi-grade education are mainly a result of shoddy or lack of support adequate material for teachers. Additionally, these authors revealed that some teachers involved in multi-grade teaching are not competent in important aspects such as lesson planning and lack commitment. Teachers who teach in multi-grade settings exhibit negative attitudes and are also a challenge for the system (Brown, 2008). Furthermore, some authors and task teams suggest challenges result from inadequate

tertiary training (Wallace & Allen, 2001). Perhaps teachers prefer or are used to teaching the curricula of mono-grade settings, which reportedly have fewer challenges relative to multi-grade teaching.

The following solutions are suggested to mitigate some of the challenges. These include the need for adequate teacher training, addressing high rates of learner absenteeism, and providing relevant textbooks (Little, 2005).

2.3.12 Causes of multi-grade teaching challenges in the Foundation Phase

Shayi (2016) notes that where the government allocates resources, it is proportional to the number of learners enrolled in a particular school within a particular academic calendar. According to Tambukani (2004), the biggest challenge was the lack of adequate infrastructure at schools that taught multi-grade classes. This was due to the lack of teachers per grade and the lack of classrooms. Overall, parents and communities surrounding such schools plagued by myriad challenges tend to lose faith in them (Jeffrey, 2012).

2.3.13 Teacher's perception towards multi-grade classrooms

It is essential to understand teachers' perceptions about teaching in a system because it determines their performance. Given that the multi-grade system is different from the mono-grade system, the curricula and approach to its implementation have changed, and the changes are associated with confusion (Makoelle & Malindi, 2014). Some teachers experience difficulties managing discipline in multi-grade classrooms as with mono-grade classrooms. Teachers should perceive all learners equally and subject them to equal treatment (Chihana & Banda, 2013).

These perceptions can be addressed by ensuring that multi-grade learning is formalised, a multi-grade environment is established, and teachers should be equipped with the required skills set (Karlberg-Granlund, 2011; Chapman & Adams, 2002; Stone & Burriss, 2019). In addition, multi-grade education is likely perceived differently by teachers, parents and learners (Duban & Şen, 2020; Yurtbakan & Akyıldız, 2020; Yolcu, 2020). Recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has created

perceptions, particularly about multi-grade education offered through distance or rotational school attendance; however, there is scanty literature on these. It would be interesting to understand the perceptions regarding how the pandemic affected teaching and learning in multi-grade classes involving more than one grade in one classroom.

Indeed, recent research reveals how the COVID-19 pandemic affected education. However, it remains unknown how teachers involved in multi-grade education have experienced the pandemic (Çiçek, Tanhan & Tanrıverdi, 2020). Knowledge of this is crucial because the pandemic forced a rethink of teaching and learning. For example, multi-grade systems adapted to online, in-person, and at times, both modes of teaching.

2.3.14 Inadequate learning for multi-grade classes

The literature has reported a shortage of appropriate resource materials in multi-grade settings of developing countries (Berry in Little, 2006; Kyne, 2005; Little, 2005; Veenman, 1995). This contrasts sharply with developed countries, where such systems generally have adequate economic resources. In particular, the endowment of resources regarding well-resourced classrooms in developed countries is unlimited and provides uninterrupted internet and multimedia access. The opposite is true for developing countries, as some teachers spend part of their salary funding learners' educational materials (Aksoy, 2008). In some cases, inadequate learning is caused by some parents' lack of interest or cooperation (UNESCO, 1989).

2.3.15 Inadequate learning opportunities in multi-grade teaching in South Africa

Inadequate learning caused by the poor management of multi-grade schools is also common in South Africa. Teachers in multi-grade classrooms are expected to do multiple tasks at once, which is demanding. In fact, they are expected to perform multiple tasks within a relatively shortened school calendar (du Plessis & Subramanien, 2014).

2.3.16 Managing the multi-grade classroom

Classroom management skills are crucial for teachers involved in multi-grade education. These skills partly assist teachers in coping with the workload and time management (Joubert, 2009). Interestingly, learners can also play a crucial role in enabling better classroom management (Berry, 2007). For example, a multi-grade classroom is better managed when learners are taught to learn independently while being cooperative (Brown, 2010).

2.3.17 The role of the teacher in managing the multi-grade classroom

Learners can play a role in supporting teachers to effect management of multi-grade classes, but the teachers' role is significant (Vincent, 1999c; Muthayan, 1999; Dean et al., cited in Muthayan, 1999). This is partly because teachers are expected to meet the different needs of the mixed-aged learners, be informed on their development and learning, and be conversant with a variety of teaching strategies required by mixed-aged learners in a multi-grade classroom (Vincent, 1999c). Further, the teacher must be well-organised and capable of planning well (Vincent, 1999c; Muthayan, 1999; Dean et al., cited in Muthayan, 1999; Joubert, 2010).

2.3.18 Curriculum management for multi-grade classes

As expected, the curriculum of multi-grade classrooms should be different from that of mono-grade classes. Interestingly, the Task Team identified the lack of and need for an appropriate curriculum for multi-grade teachers in South Africa for the Review of Implementation of the National Curriculum Statements (DoE, 2009:60). Therefore, when developing it, policymakers need to be aware of the requirements of a multi-grade set up that would enable them to design an appropriate curriculum and materials and prepare teachers and strategies (Kapenda, 2010). The curriculum should encourage teachers and provide them with materials and training inputs (Haingura, 2014; MoE, 2011b). It ought to be grade-appropriate (Brown, 2010:194).

A curriculum designed for teachers involved in multi-grade classrooms should include how they should coordinate learning in a class comprised of multiple grades in one

class simultaneously and alter the mono-grade curriculum to be compatible with multi-grade classrooms.

2.3.19 Curriculum management in South African multi-grade schools

According to Joubert (2010), multi-grade schools were not mentioned in the South African DoE documents. At that time, the curriculum was designed to accommodate single-grade classrooms. Years later, a report written by a Task Team tasked with reviewing the implementation of the National Curriculum Statements (DoE, 2009) highlighted the lack of policies meant to guide multi-grade teachers.

2.3.20 Time management in the multi-grade classroom

As mentioned in earlier sections, time management is one of the critical factors in a multi-grade setting. Teachers' insufficient time is considered among the main constraints challenging multi-grade teachers (MoE, 2011b). It is commendable that a period in Namibian schools lasts approximately 40 minutes in mono- and multi-grades (MoE, 2011b). However, some multi-grade teachers do not see this approach as helpful because while addressing the needs of learners in different grades, they deal with the individual needs of learners. These teachers may have a point because multi-grade teaching requires more time for organisation and lesson planning (MoE, 2011b). In fact, some South African multi-grade teachers revealed they did not have sufficient time to spend with each grade level in each subject area (Mulryan-Kyne, 2005). In addition, the lack of learner discipline can also affect time management in the system (Mulryan-Kyne, 2005).

2.3.21 Support for multi-grade teachers

Brown (2010) argues that teachers should be protected by the schools and communities, guardians, or parents. However, Vinjevold and Schindler (1997) suggest that the teachers could do with support from the local or regional government, national policy, and school principals. One form of support that communities surrounding multi-grade schools could do is show appreciation for education (Titus, 2004 as cited in Brown, 2010). That way, communities could become or provide strategic resources to

the system, enabling the school to extend the curriculum to the community (Brown, 2010).

2.3.22 Strategies to alleviate the challenges of teaching multi-grade classrooms

According to UNESCO (2015), multi-grade teachers' attitudes become positive as they understand the strategies on learner performance and workload; thus, suggesting that implementing improved strategies could help alleviate their challenges. One suggested strategy entails mixing multi-age classes (Bua & Martin, 2020). Another strategy involves training learners to teach in mono-and multi-grade systems (Cornish, 2013). In the Philippines, they use Escuela Nueva, which aids in developing soft skills for learners (Le, 2018). Additionally, classroom time management in the Philippines is done by using a Daily Lesson Log (DLL) (Ballesteros & Ocampo, 2016). Little (2004) suggests that such systems should adjust subjects or lessons to reduce them. Another strategy requires teachers to manage time, particularly in learners' learning processes, peer teaching, and integrated teaching (Mortazavi-zadeh, Nili, Isfahani & Hassani, 2017; Tiernan, Casserly & Maguire, 2018). Lastly, teachers should adapt and prepare different learning materials for diverse learners (Smit, Hyry-Behammer & Raggi, 2015).

Blease and Condy (2015) added that in multi-grade classroom teaching, teachers face a challenge of learners with learning barriers in academics. Therefore, it is challenging to teach learners from different grades. In many cases, multi-grade classrooms struggle with presenting knowledge in a logical sequence (Sampson & Condy, 2016). In addition, teachers of multi-grade classrooms have insufficient time and are required to design two different lessons for different grades; thus, leading to incomplete lesson plans due to limited time management (Mulryan-Kyne, 2004).

Furthermore, in multi-grade classes, teachers should maximize learners' diversity (Hyry-Beihammer & Hascher, 2015). They found it challenging to teach mixed classes. As a result, they looked for ways to find commonalities among their learners. At the same time, they also maximize their learners' dispersed characteristics and abilities. Those advanced students could assist their classmates while the teacher is teaching the other group of learners. Grouping the learners is also a way of effectively managing

the multi-grade classes. MG teachers performed flexible grouping practices (Casserly, Tiernan & Maguire, 2019). In grouping the learners, the teachers could save time presenting the lessons. The learners can also interact with each other and express their ideas. In this way, effective learning will take place.

2.3.23 Advantages of multi-grade teaching

Despite the widely published challenges that hamper the successful implementation of multi-grade education, multi-grade teaching has advantages and disadvantages. It ensures that learners are involved in collaborative learning; enforces unity between learners; caters to uniqueness; makes learners the centre of the learning process; and as teachers grow in the system, it motivates them.

The following patterns are used widely in multi-grade set-ups and were identified by Siririka (2018): having an additional but parallel class in which the teacher would teach one grade and be able to keep an eye on the other grade, which may be doing individual or group activities; a whole-class comprised of mixed grade groups where the teacher arranges the learners from different grades to sit in mixed groups and teaches the same content to the whole class; alternate teaching where the teachers take turns to teach different grades, which can be in the same class; and separate grade groups, where the teacher accommodates learners in one class but gives them the same or different activities (Taole & Mncube, 2012:154).

2.3.24 Strategies to mitigate challenges in multi-grade teaching

There is a need to find solutions to mitigate challenges that constrain multi-grade classrooms. As Joubert (2010) suggested, one of the strategies involves organising the learning environment to enable learners to sit according to their grades. Another strategy is that the Department of Basic Education should re-train the teachers involved in multi-grade classrooms to equip them with requisite skills; implement relevant educational policies, educational materials and equipment; and pre-training teachers before their deployment to multi-grade systems (Taole & Mncube, 2012).

However, the paradox in multi-grade teaching is that many teachers are trained in mono-grade pedagogy and have minimal resources at their disposal. Jovani (2010)

further emphasises the need for multi-dimensional strategies when training multi-grade teachers, both pre-service and in-service. For example, establishing a library corner could be used as a workstation for learners and as a tool to manage a multi-grade classroom (Jordan, 2006). Lastly, teachers could establish activity centres to help learners focus on certain topics or themes (Department of Basic Education, 2010; Mathot, 2001; Vincent, 1999).

2.3.25 Strategies to enhance multi-grade teaching

Apart from mitigating the challenges that affect multi-grade education, the system can be enhanced. The first would be to reform the current curriculum used in multi-grade teaching (Little, 2005). Alternatively, as shown in Columbia, the curriculum can be divided into specific objectives and learning materials or develop a curriculum that focuses on themes. In a multi-grade classroom, there are different kinds of pupils. Thus, the teacher can use other pupils' unique skills, talents and advanced skills to help their other classmates. Some pupils were intellectually superior compared to others. Therefore, teachers allow them to be facilitators and little experts to their other classmates. To acknowledge pupils' differences, practices like following a spiral curriculum, having working plans, and peer learning are relevant (Hyry-Beihammer & Hascher, 2015).

An effective method for teaching a multi-grade classroom is the learning environment, learning process, and learning outcome (LEPO) framework (Msimanga, 2020). In teaching multi-grade, teachers must prepare the learning environment. In addition, they must ensure adequate time allotment for the learner's learning process. The learners are then given assessment tasks that match their academic competence. Therefore, multi-grade education is considered a classroom strategy as school administrators perceive it as beneficial to many people and to achieve education for all (Buaraphan, Inrit & Kochasila, 2018; Thephavongsa, 2018). Due to the creation of multi-grade education, learners from remote areas have access to education. However, some teachers continue to serve their needs in order for them to be educated.

Reading classes can become a classroom strategy in multi-grade teaching because it fosters pupils' emotional, intellectual, social, and academic well-being (Sampson,

2016). Its positive effect is not just in the educational aspect of a person but also in other elements. Some examples of differentiated teaching and learning strategies include: flexible grouping, learning preferences, anchoring activities, tiered activities, adjusting oral and written questions, learning centres, and independent and shared study projects (PASTEP, 2000). They provide varied activities for learners to learn; thus, learners can choose which way they learn best. Other teaching strategies in Multi-grade teaching include peer and integrated teaching and different groupings such as adjacent, row and sex grouping (Mortazavizadeh, Nili, Isfahani & Hassani, 2017; Tiernan, Casserly & Maguire, 2018).

One of the classroom strategies in multi-grade education in the Philippines is the conduct of Escuela Nueva, an educational innovation from Colombia. It is known for developing soft skills for learners (Le, 2018); thus, multi-grade teaching pedagogies need to be pupil-centred.

2.3 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter reviewed published literature concerning the South African education system in general and multi-grade teaching in particular. In addition, literature based on multi-grade teaching in developed and developing nations was discussed. Overall, the literature concurs that multi-grade teaching places greater demands on teachers relative to mono-grade teaching. As a result, most teachers have negative attitudes toward a system compounded by challenges towards multi-grade teaching due to workload and lack of support in many African countries. Furthermore, multi-grade teaching consists of methods or strategies aimed at addressing the challenges faced by teachers in multi-grade classrooms.

Chapter 3 will outline the study's research design and methodology. It further explores the study's research questions, paradigm, design, data collection methods, sample and realisation of samples, data collection, data processing/analysis, measures to ensure trustworthiness, and ethical considerations.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter provided a background of the study's theoretical framework. In particular, it reviewed published literature concerning challenges faced by teachers in multi-grade classrooms in selected developed and under-developed countries. In addition, the previous chapter cited and described published literature that revealed challenges that reportedly confront teachers involved in Foundation Phase education in South Africa. The conclusion section of the chapter summarised the previous sections. In this chapter, the study's research design and methodology are discussed. Specifically, the chapter describes data collection components such as the target population and its size, description of the sample, and the research instruments. Finally, the trustworthiness of research and ethical considerations are also discussed in this chapter.

3.2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

For this study, selected research methods were assumed to provide an in-depth understanding of challenges facing Foundation Phase teachers in multi-grade education. This study is based on qualitative research because the researcher aimed to understand the challenges facing Foundation Phase teachers in multi-grade education. In this approach, a researcher collects data through face-to-face settings and by interacting with participants in their settings (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). For the purpose of this study, the researcher conducted face-to-face interviews with selected participants in the environment where their perceptions and experiences on multi-grade education occur, that is, in school. McMillan and Schumacher (2001) explain that qualitative research largely involves one phenomenon. Kornbluh (2015) concurs by adding that when adopting qualitative research, a researcher intends to advance an understanding of a particular phenomenon by evaluating how participants view and cope with a phenomenon. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), qualitative research should clearly explain the phenomenon within the context in which it would have occurred. The advantage of qualitative research is that it provides answers even on a complex phenomenon (Fouche & Delpont, 2011). Apart from

focusing on a phenomenon, a qualitative research study involves a narrative inquiry. In simple terms, this is a type of qualitative research through which a researcher elicits responses regarding participants' lived experiences of a particular challenge (Bleakley, 2005).

3.3 RESEARCH PARADIGM

The term 'paradigm' was derived from a Greek word and means 'pattern' (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Generally speaking, a paradigm has been described as a set of common beliefs, agreements or arrangements on how questions, challenges or problems can be investigated or addressed (Gubar, 1990; Fraser & Robinson, 2004). With regard to scientific research, particularly educational research, the term research paradigm has been defined quite varyingly. A research paradigm can be used to guide or direct formalised scientific research, enquiry, discovery or investigation (Davies & Fisher, 2018). The researcher's assumptions, principles, or philosophical orientations express the guidance or direction. Willis (2007) defines a research paradigm as "a comprehensive belief system, world view, or framework that guides research and practice in a field."

For this study, the researcher selected and used the interpretivist paradigm primarily because it allowed participants the opportunity to express their views on the title of the study. Scholars including Denzin and Lincoln (2001) define a paradigm as underlying assumptions and intellectual structure upon which research and development in a field of inquiry are based. As described by Denzin and Lincoln (2001), the beliefs consist of the following three categories, namely ontology, epistemology, and methodology.

3.3.1 Ontology

Ontology is a category under a scientific research paradigm concerned with assumptions used in order to understand the nature of reality. Therefore, the solutions needed to solve reality or answer a research question are partly through indicating existing knowledge (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). For example, one of the research questions asked in this study was: What are the causes of multi-grade teaching challenges in the Foundation Phase? Therefore, to answer this question, the study

used existing literature to highlight the causes of teaching multi-grade education in other countries.

3.3.2 Epistemology

Epistemology is concerned with how a researcher intends to determine knowledge in order to achieve reality, a solution or an answer to a research question (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). Determining research knowledge in order to answer a research question required interaction or a relationship between an inquirer and role players or participants. In this study, the inquirer was the researcher; the role players were the teachers, HoDs, and principals. Epistemology comprised four categories, namely positivism, pragmatism, advocacy, and social construction. These were briefly discussed below:

- *Positivism* adopts a research approach where a hypothesis is used to determine whether there is a relationship between certain research factors (Park, Konge & Artino, 2020).
- *Pragmatism* suggests that a researcher uses the most appropriate methodological technique to solve a certain research problem (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019).
- *Advocacy* involves research designed to recommend solutions that are of interest to policymakers (Poonam, 2017).
- *Social constructivism* guides knowledge and how it can be created.

Methodology explained how a researcher can use different techniques and, at times, rules to explore different components of research. Together, ontology, epistemology and methodology form a research paradigm and were crucial in research since they defined and give shape to the conduct of inquiry (Chitsamatanga, 2016).

Given that this study aimed to understand a defined phenomenon, the most appropriate research paradigm selected is the interpretivism paradigm. This type of paradigm was selected because the study would allow participants to express their views on the chosen topic. Using an interpretive paradigm, the researcher intended to interpret a social environment by assessing human behaviour. For this study, human

behaviour refers to the selected teachers' perceptions of the benefits and challenges associated with teaching in a multi-grade setting. Moreover, this paradigm allowed the researcher to discover in-depth knowledge of the lived experiences of teachers, HoDs, and principals involved in multi-grade education settings. Worth noting is that the researcher makes meaning through interacting with either individuals or a group interacting with each other (van Rensburg, 2001). Therefore, in addition to the interaction of participants, the researcher ought to conduct in-depth interviews, make observations or interpret documents, artefacts and other sources (van Rensburg, 2001).

3.4 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This research study focused on the Foundation Phase of education because it is the most crucial stage that defines a child's future. In most countries ranked at similar economic status as South Africa, there is evidence that multi-grade education is associated with fewer challenges. Interestingly, urbanisation has increased the demand for multi-grade education in South Africa and, therefore, the need for better solutions to its challenges.

Understanding the challenges associated with multi-grade education in South Africa, particularly in the Foundation Phase, could improve conditions. Therefore, this research study's emphasis on evaluating challenges that plague Foundation Phase multi-grade education is an attempt to identify previously unreported or unknown factors and; thus, create new knowledge in the process. Moreover, this study is significant because it will likely produce results that will guide government and school management in addressing some of the challenges. This study will be available for use by teachers, school management, policymakers, and government officials.

3.5 RESEARCH APPROACH

Of the different approaches used in research, this study adopted the qualitative approach. This approach involves one-on-one interactions with fewer participants in their settings, understanding that their experiences represent and are relevant to a wider population (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). Despite its reliance on a smaller

sample size, it has multiple advantages, including that the participants shared their lived experiences, insights, thoughts, and perspectives on a particular subject (Silva, 2017). It also allowed for less formal settings between the researcher and participants, which minimises the chances of anxiety and uncertainties (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). For this study, the qualitative research approach was used to understand the challenges learners and teachers face in multi-grade education in selected schools in the Eastern Cape Province, South Africa. In particular, the researcher sought to understand the challenges teachers who taught in Foundation Phase multi-grade classrooms face.

3.6 RESEARCH DESIGN

The literature stated that a research design outlines how research or an investigation should be carried out. As noted in an earlier section, the research design allowed a researcher to create a framework that explains which and how research methods or techniques are suitable to achieve a study's objectives or research problem. In order for the research to have an impact, the chosen research methods or techniques should be approved by scientific procedures as this ensures that the results obtained are relevant to the research topic and aims. For this study, the researcher intended to understand the challenges faced by teachers that teach in multi-grade Foundation Phase classrooms in selected schools in South Africa. The researcher hoped to understand whether the challenges faced by Foundation Phase teachers in multi-grade classrooms are similar to recommend solutions for the identified challenges. The study achieved this by using the qualitative approach through which the participants shared their lived experiences, insights, thoughts, and perspectives on Foundation Phase multi-grade education.

Saunders et al., (2003) posit that a research design must be compatible with the nature of the research to be undertaken. Given that this study aimed to understand multi-grade teachers' perceptions, a case-study design allowed the researcher to explore this understanding. Therefore, multi-grade schools and multi-grade teachers within these schools were selected for this study. A case study is described in the next section.

3.7 CASE STUDY

According to Ary, Jacobs, Irvine and Walker (2018), a case study is referred to as “a type of ethnographic or field study that focuses on a single unit, such as one individual, one group, one organization or one program,” with multiple methods employed to collect and analyse data. On the other hand, Robson (1993) cited in Saunders et al., (1997) defines a case study as the development of detailed, intensive knowledge about a single “case” or a small number of related cases. Yin (1984) further defines it as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in its real-life context by using multiple sources of evidence.

The aims of using a case study were described by various authors, including Rule and John (2011), who posit that it involved the compilation of coherent ideas or thoughts in order to show or have a better understanding of a particular case in its context. It can be aimed at obtaining an in-depth understanding of the meanings and value attached to a particular phenomenon explored by a research study (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). McMillan and Schumacher (2010) also contributed to the debate by stressing that a case study does not aim to evaluate the experiences of unpredictable participants.

By exploring a case study, researchers emphasised the importance of a researcher having access to and understanding of the settings of a chosen environment and a good interaction with the participants (Naidoo & Muthukrishna, 2016; Tafai, 2017).

Interestingly, the literature review showed that researchers have identified different types of case studies. Differences between the types of case studies are primarily based on or depend on the type of phenomenon being studied and/or the research question explored. For example, Yin (in Saunders, et al., 2003) distinguishes between a single-case strategy and a multiple-case strategy. They note that a single-case strategy involves a unique phenomenon studied at a time, while a multiple-case strategy involves more than one case. With this background in mind for this study, the researcher conducted interviews in three multi-grade schools.

In some cases, multiple-case studies were based on exploring the same research phenomenon across cases (Denzin, 1978). This view was similar to Yin (2003), who believed that the logic underlying the use of multiple-case studies is the same. Some authors have identified that studies designed to involve multiple cases tend to have distinct advantages and disadvantages relative to single-case designs (Herriot and Firestone (1983) as cited in Yin (2003). In the main findings (obtained through a design), involving multiple cases is often considered more compelling. Therefore, the overall study was regarded as more robust.

A case study approach was used for this research because it was suitable for studying a small sample. Creswell (2009) defined a case study as research that researchers adopt to study a unit of a population as a specific case within its participants to address the research problem or questions stated against the phenomena of interest investigated. For this study, the phenomenon was multi-grade education in that it has the potential to present a humanistic, holistic comprehension of complex situations (Brown, 2008).

3.8 DATA COLLECTION METHODS

The main data collection instruments include interviews, questionnaires, books, reports and files. However, for this research, the researcher referred to an instrument that allowed for data collection through semi-structured interviews, observations, document analysis, and focus group interviews. These data collection methods are described below.

3.8.1 Semi-structured

The collection of research data using the semi-structured approach requires that a researcher plans questions that can lead a particular interview or conversation to answer research questions (Ok & Erdogan, 2010). The approach was considered to generate primary data while promoting human interaction (Coetzee, 2014). The advantage of using it was that it is flexible, adaptable, and versatile and was considered suitable for use with participants of any age or education level, including visually impaired persons (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). It enabled researchers to

collect meaningful data and make sense of participants' experiences in a particular context. However, its disadvantage was that it was time-consuming (Cohen, Manion, Morrison, & Wyse, 2010). Furthermore, Cohen, Morrison and Morrison (2007) note that data gathered using this approach can be difficult to analyse as the researcher may find it challenging to combine similar answers.

Generally speaking, interviews were social interactions between individuals that allow a researcher to control the line of questioning (Creswell, 2009). Therefore, interviews were considered a rich source for exploring participants' feelings and attitudes and investigating relationships, activities, situations or materials. Furthermore, it leads to gathering data or information that was research-relevant and centred on the evidence to be generated for achieving the research objectives of describing, predicting, or explaining the phenomenon (Cohen & Manion, 2011). In addition, interviews were valuable in qualitative research because they provided in-depth and holistic descriptions. Therefore, in qualitative research, interviews were recommended in order to obtain information related to participants' emotions, feelings, and experiences.

The semi-structured data collection method allowed a researcher to gain a deeper understanding of a study's phenomenon. In this study, with the permission of the Eastern Cape DoE, semi-structured interviews were used and involved teachers, HoDs, and principals. The participants were interviewed at their workplace. Where necessary, some of the questions were rephrased. In addition, responses to interview questions were audio-recorded with the participant's permission. Participants were informed that their participation in this study would be treated with the highest degree of confidentiality.

3.8.2 Observation

Research that involves observations concerns gathering data largely by means of a researcher observing situations and noting these observations through a checklist encapsulating the predetermined relevant actions to observe (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). In the case of this research, the researcher made use of structured observation to conduct data collection (see Appendix M).

Specifically, the researcher obtained permission to observe participants from each selected school's principal. Participants were observed using an observation spreadsheet during the observation period, which allowed them to be close to the participants. In addition to the observations as a participant-observer, the lead researcher took part in extra activities done at schools, such as morning and afternoon devotion. Further, observations were made in classrooms where multi-grade teaching and learning occurred. Such observations were intended to allow for comfortable interaction between the researcher and the participants.

Participants had the opportunity to provide detailed and elaborated responses representing their authentic views and perceptions of multi-grade teaching. In this regard, participants had ample time to reflect before responding, ensuring that the primary data from the interview represents weighted opinions precisely reported and checked with the participants (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). A tape recorder was used with the participants' permission to ensure complete accuracy of what transpired in the interviews and have an audit trail for reliability checks.

3.8.3 Document analysis

One of the most common and widely accepted definitions of document analysis in education research is by Bowen (2009), which describes the phrase as “evaluating documents in such a way that empirical knowledge was produced and understanding was developed.”

Evaluating documents was crucial in qualitative research because it assists the researcher in comprehending the original experiences of participants of a study, among other benefits. Although documents were generally categorised as physical or electronic in nature, the main types of documents that were analysed in the research are categorised as public, personal, and physical. Moreover, public records were considered by organisations or institutions as official documents and include data on handbooks. Personal records or files contain details on primarily personal experiences or activities recorded in journals. On the other hand, physical documents include flyers.

In the context of this study, public documents were considered the most appropriate type of document analysis to address the study's research question: What are the causes of multi-grade teaching challenges in the Foundation Phase? Therefore, the researcher will collect and analyse the following public documents: class attendance registers, learner record sheets, classwork books, and weekly and monthly books.

3.8.4 Focus group interviews

In a broad description, focus group interviews were concerned with interviewing a group of participants that have a particular view about a common setting, issue or experience. In scientific research, Denscombe (2007) defined a focus group as consisting of a small group of people who are brought together by a researcher with an aim to explore their feelings and ideas about a particular or clearly defined topic.

This type of interview was participatory research used to collect data concerning participants' experiences and the meanings they attribute to them (Adler et al., 2019). On the other hand, a focus group interview involves a setting in which a relatively homogeneous group of participants reflect on the questions asked by an interviewer. As mentioned in previous chapters, this research study included focus interviews. These interviews allowed the researcher to interact directly with the selected participants, namely teachers, HoDs, and principals in multi-grade education.

These direct and interactive interviews exposed the researcher to the settings and how the participants adapted to the environment. Therefore, McMillan and Schumacher concur that focus group interviews solve problems efficiently relative to other instruments (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). For this study, the focus group comprised multi-grade classroom role players, including HoDs. The focus group interviews aimed to determine the main challenges the selected participants experienced with teaching and managing multi-grade settings. It was also used to get insight into the constructive techniques they apply to ensure optimal learning in their multi-grade classrooms. The focus group interviews were arranged at a place and time convenient to all participants.

Focus group interviews provide a platform for participants to share their experiences, knowledge and views with the scientific audience or their peers. For example, the focus group interviews involved consenting Foundation Phase teachers, HoDs, and principals who participated in multi-grade education in the five selected schools. This was to allow the participants to share their challenges and initiatives on multi-grade teaching.

The researcher conducted four focus group interviews with the participant teachers teaching multi-grade classes in the four selected schools. Each focus group consisted of four teachers. Focus group interviewing was applicable as the teacher participants had accumulated knowledge and skills on multi-grade teaching to share with peers through checks and balances within a focus group discussion environment. Therefore, focus group interviewing allowed teacher participants to vent and share their challenges and countering actions with multi-grade teaching while responding to researcher prompts.

The following steps explain how focus group interviews were conducted. Three primary schools were selected, and the researcher interviewed teachers who taught in multi-grade Foundation Phase classrooms. Each focus group consisted of three (3) participants. Focus groups were appropriate because the selected multi-grade teachers shared similar experiences. Therefore, the focus group allowed them to share their thoughts before answering the researcher.

3.9 POPULATION AND SAMPLING

3.9.1 Population

The general definition of the term 'population' is any group of people, items, or elements that show certain characteristics. In research, the term refers to a group, a collection of a number of units that conform to certain criteria or are included in a research study (Gray, 2004; Babbie & Mouton, 2009). In addition, a population can refer to a group of elements that are of interest to a researcher (Polit & Beck, 2009). This view is supported by Babbie and Mouton (2009), who state that a population is a group or collection in which a researcher is interested. It is expected that a group of

participants that a researcher was interested in may not be available when they were needed to participate in a study. Other than these circumstances, the researcher may consider excluding some of the participants from the study.

Furthermore, in this study, 'population' was used to refer to all the target primary schools in the Joe Gqabi District of Education in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. While there are forty (40) primary schools in the Joe Gqabi District of education, approximately ten (10) of these were involved in multi-grade education. Therefore, only five (5) were chosen for participation or as research sites for this study. However, within each of the selected primary schools, all the teachers teaching multi-grade classes in the Foundation Phase, including their HoDs and principals of the selected schools, were participants in the study.

3.9.2 Sampling

Studies in education that involved qualitative research include a sample. Burns and Grove referred to sampling as a subset of a population and is chosen to represent the population of a particular study. On the other hand, Johnson and Christensen (2004) posit that a sample was a group of individuals, items or events that represent the characteristics of a larger group from which a sample is drawn. Overall, it can be said that qualitative research requires that a sample is of a smaller size that was representative of a population and yields quality results.

There were two types of sampling, namely purposive and convenient. Campbell et al., (2020) describe purposive sampling as deliberately selecting participants that would effectively provide appropriate and useful information while using limited research resources. By contrast, Elfil and Nedida (2020) posit that convenient sampling involves a situation where a researcher selects participants according to their convenient availability and accessibility. Of the mentioned sampling types, the purposive sampling technique was chosen for this research study. This was because the knowledge or information on challenges concerning multi-grade teaching could not be sourced through using convenient sampling. Therefore, the researcher deliberately selected only the schools, teachers, HoDs, and principals involved in multi-grade education. Through this purposive selection, the researcher lives and works close to these

schools and intended that the participants would provide useful and accurate information on challenges associated with multi-grade education at the Foundation Phase.

Sixteen (16) participants were selected to participate in this study, eight (8) teachers, four (4) HoDs, and four (4) principals. The teachers and HoDs were selected because they were involved in the Foundation Phase of multi-grade education, while the principals were chosen because of their knowledge generated through experience on matters concerning multi-grade education and challenges associated with this approach. It is worth noting that the selected teachers were only those that had taught in multi-grade classrooms for more than three years.

In addition, the four specific research sites were selected based on their experience with the challenges of multi-grade teaching in the Foundation Phase. Data were gathered at each research site to gain a comprehensive perspective on challenges encountered with multi-grade teaching and how individuals with different perceptions of multi-grade teaching counter those challenges. The HoDs were selected as participants as they represented authoritative knowledge and know-how on teaching and learning the subjects in their school phases. In addition, as the executive leaders of their schools, the school principals were able to comment authoritatively on the management of multi-grade teaching for effective teaching and engendering successful learning.

Moreover, the study's participants ought to have been members of the School Management Team (SMT), suggesting that they were aware of challenges that plagued multi-grade settings, particularly the teachers. Notably, prior to the interviews, the participants were requested to consent to participating in the study. They were also informed that they had a right not to participate in the study and would not be penalised for such a decision. Lastly, each participant was identified using a pseudonym to protect their identity.

3.10 DATA ANALYSIS, DISCUSSION AND PRESENTATION

In qualitative educational research, the term data analysis referred to “the process of breaking up the data into parts and reorganising the parts into a reasonable whole” (Potter, 2013). The data analysis process involved activities related to arranging research data orderly, planning its structure, and conducting different analyses so that data was interpreted and understood correctly. It was a process through which relationships amongst relevant themes are analysed, summarised and translated into data in terms of the participants’ points of view (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010).

According to Creswell (2009), undertaking data analysis required a researcher to organise and prepare the data into categories, conduct different analyses, operations to ensure the correct understanding of data, and presenting the data systematically (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). The thematic analysis was adopted for use in this study because it was suitable for identifying, analysing, organising, describing, and reporting themes found within a data collection site (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Part of the analysed data focused on the various teaching strategies used in multi-grade classrooms. Before analysis, the data were arranged orderly using the seven steps below (Onwuegbuzie, 2011):

- i. Data reduction: Data obtained through the three methods selected for this research were reduced through data organisation and coding. The transformation of information is usually experimentally derived into corrected, ordered, and simplified forms.
- ii. Data display: Data were displayed on a chart. This helped the researcher compare and link themes – graphical representations of information and data using visual elements like charts and graphs.
- iii. Data transformation: The researcher converted data from one format or structure into another format or structure. Data were transformed into pieces called segments. This transformation was carried out together with the process of displaying the data. Collected data then took on a descriptive form. The researcher described data so that findings could be produced.
- iv. Correlation of data from various methods: Data from the interviews, document analysis and observation were later correlated or triangulated.

Common themes were then used to classify data from the various collection methods, whilst, on the other hand, differences were noted.

- v. Consolidation of data: Under this step, data were consolidated. Consolidation leads to a point where data cannot be separated according to collection methods. At this stage, findings appear and are combined wherever they may live, and any errors are cleaned up.
- vi. Comparison of data: This step was carried out together with data correlation (the correlation of data involves data comparison). The researcher displayed similarities and differences between data collected, typically text files such as source codes.
- vii. Integration of data: The researcher combined the data from multiple source systems to create unified sets of information for both operational and analytical uses.

There are cases where data analysis involved collection through reviewing documents such as minutes of staff meetings, professional plans and school reports. This study included instances where documents were reviewed in search of possible advantages or challenges that teachers might have mentioned that multi-grade teaching posed. Like other approaches, the analysis of documents has advantages and weaknesses (Yin, 2003).

3.11 TRUSTWORTHINESS

Trustworthiness, also known as validity, is a quality parameter that refers to the confidence in the accurateness of findings of a study, interpretation, and methods, as determined by a researcher, participants, or readers (Pilot & Beck, 2014; Creswell, 2009). Trustworthiness was also considered a measure used to assess the authenticity and accuracy of results (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). Similarly, Knaub (2016) states that trustworthiness is directly linked to the research's truth, significance, and objectivity. Apart from determining the truthfulness of data, trustworthiness referred to the extent to which data generated from a study was plausible and credible (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Also, the data ought to be dependable, transferable, and confirmable (Gunawan, 2015). For this study on multi-grade teaching, the researcher kept an open mind throughout the individual and focus group interviewing

process to accommodate the possibility of different meanings attached to the same reality.

For this research study to be considered worthy, the researcher adopted the below criteria.

3.11.1 Credibility

When conducting educational research, particularly that was based on a qualitative approach, it was crucial to ensure that the study's findings are credible. Researchers involved in qualitative research consider credibility as confidence related to the findings of a study. Credibility can be achieved by ensuring rigour in research, effective communication, and that research results are believable (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). One way to ensure the credibility of research findings was for a researcher to maintain prolonged interactions with participants, particularly after interviews or observations. Lastly, the credibility of research findings was achieved by playing recorded audio to participants, which ensured that they approved of the authenticity of the content.

3.11.2 Transferability

Transferability is the extent to which findings were useful to persons in other settings. It is different from other aspects of research in that readers determine how applicable the findings were to their situation (Connelly, 2016). In simple terms, it concerns ensuring that research findings were transferable to other similar or different settings, with different respondents or other contexts.

3.11.3 Dependability

Dependability referred to the extent to which research data or findings were generated in a research study and are auditable or can be critiqued over time and under the conditions of the study (Polit & Beck, 2014). Merriam (2015) agreed that it was a degree to which research findings can be duplicated in comparative settings.

3.11.4 Confirmability

Confirmability was concerned with the degree to which findings can be repeated, that is, confirmed by other researchers or other settings (Connelly, 2016). It can be suggested that confirmability implies that data can be tracked to their source (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). This aspect of the criteria ensures that the interpretation of findings is no figment of the researcher's viewpoint or biases, instead, that findings are clearly derived from the data. Therefore, the researcher should explain why certain methods were chosen along with their advantages and/or disadvantages.

3.12 RESEARCH ETHICS

According to Knight (2019), ethics in research involves a relationship between a researcher and a participant and is guided by consent, anonymity and confidentiality. Research ethics are important because they ensure that participants' dignity, confidentiality or anonymity, and privacy in a research study are respected and protected. This study upheld these by obtaining the participants' consent and not disclosing the names of the schools, teachers, HoDs, and principals that participated. Moreover, permission to conduct the study was sought from the UNISA CEDU REC, the DBE, the district office where the selected schools are located, and the school principal of each target school.

3.12.1 Harm and risk

The study involved teachers aged above Eighteen (18) years. However, there was a cause of discomfort to participants of this research study beyond normal levels of inconvenience. First, the focus group questions required teachers to provide information about the challenges of multi-grade classes and how the principal approached these challenges. As a result, the teachers could have felt uncomfortable disclosing certain information or giving more details about the school. In addition, participants may have been uncomfortable that their views would be recorded, particularly in cases where a recording is leaked and their voices recognised by their colleagues or others who know them. However, the researcher ensured them that the information collected would be kept safe and that no one could access it. Other

possible risks included pain, injury, feeling of stress, guilt, and confusion. These risks could have been caused by certain questions asked during the interview.

Moreover, the researcher asked for information on whatever may be harmful to prevent harm to participants. Participants were informed of the need for their contribution to help solve multi-grade challenges. Additionally, participants' letters detailed that participation was voluntary, and they could withdraw from the study at any time and at any level of involvement. Participants were also assured of their confidentiality, and voluntary participation was encouraged. Finally, the researcher explained that they could rephrase any question to ensure that participants did not experience discomfort.

If the participants experienced physical harm or injury, the researcher would request permission from the principal to call an emergency, or they would report the matter to the person responsible for first aid at school. As an accountable person, the researcher ensured that water was available during interview sessions. Lastly, the study's academic supervisor and Ethics Review Committee were also informed telephonically and via email. In such a case, the advice the supervisor and Ethics Review Committee provided was duly followed.

3.12.2 Privacy, confidentiality and anonymity

According to Pardo and Siemens (2014), privacy can mean regulating how personal information is being observed by the self or distributed to other observers. The most important aspect of research that involves access to personal information is to ensure that the researcher respects the person and/or group participating in a study. In this study, for example, the researcher respected the privacy of the selected participants.

Confidentiality in qualitative research ensures that the interaction between researchers and participants is honest and informed by consent until the publication of the research findings (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). It aims to prevent potential consequential harm to participants and afford participants control over their personal information (Jones, 2003). Participants' identities and the research sites were not disclosed in this study.

To maintain anonymity and confidentiality, the respondents were assigned individual codes such as Teacher 1, Teacher 2, Teacher 3, Teacher 4, etc. Even their sites were coded. These codes were only known to the researcher. The researcher assured all the respondents that strict anonymity and confidentiality would be maintained in this study, even if the findings were published in the future.

The researcher stored hard copies of the data, anticipating that they would be kept for five years in a locked cupboard/filing cabinet at school for future research or academic purposes. Electronic information was stored on a password protected computer so that the researcher could be the only person who could access it. Future use of the stored data will be subject to further Research Ethics Review and approval if applicable. Upon expiration of the storage period, hard copies would be burnt to ashes. Moreover, data on the computer and One-Drive will be permanently deleted through the use of a relevant programme.

3.12.3 Carefulness, honesty, and integrity

The researcher requested permission to conduct the study from the UNISA CEDU REC, the DoE and the district office. In the letter to the district office, the researcher explained the purpose of the research and the potential advantages of the study. The advantages included that the learners, teachers, principals and the Department would benefit from the study. The letter also indicated that participation would be voluntary and that participants would be allowed to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

The participants completed a consent form to be part of the study and would receive an assent letter (Appendix H, I & G). The researcher's letter indicated that confidentiality and anonymity would be applied during the study and that the collected data would be stored in a safe place.

Moreover, the researcher wrote a letter to the principals of the target schools requesting permission to conduct the study at their schools. The letter included the procedures that were expected. The researcher further assured the principal about the protocols and confidentiality of the study. Therefore, a consent letter was

distributed to the prospective teacher and principal participants (Appendix E, F & D), which they signed and returned.

The consent letter covered the purpose of the research and the reason for requesting the participation of the prospective participant. Moreover, the benefits of the study were explained, and it was emphasised that participants would not be rewarded through Withdrawal will not affect their salaries at their working institutions. Furthermore, to ensure permission was granted, the letter showed the supervisor's contact details in the form of an email address and telephone number. Finally, interested participants signed and returned the consent letters before participating in the research.

3.13 LIMITATIONS AND DELIMITATION OF THE STUDY

Allen and Wright (2014) describe limitations as possible challenges that are likely to be encountered during the course of a research study, such as time limitations and the need to accommodate informants' schedules. Potential limitations of this study included that this case study involved public primary schools in a rural setting; the findings are; thus, not generalisable to all multi-grade classrooms, schools or settings. Secondly, the participants were wary of being recorded, fearing that departmental representatives might listen to the tapes. Furthermore, some of the selected participants were uncomfortable with the interviews being conducted in English and wanted to withdraw from the study. The language barrier has been shown to hinder access to information (Guo, 2013).

Numerous delimitations constrained this study. However, the key delimitation was that the study selected five out of a possible ten multi-grade schools found in the particular district. This constraint may limit the validity of the study. Secondly, the study involved four teachers in each target school in the Foundation Phase multi-grade classrooms.

3.13.1 Informed consent and voluntary participation

Closely related to voluntary participation was the requirement of informed consent. This means that the prospective research participants were fully informed about the procedures and risks involved in this research study and had to consent to participate.

Before data collection, the researcher informed the participants of their right to refuse to participate or withdraw from the study without losing their payment. Researchers should check whether the payment constituted taxable income and whether it could affect participants' welfare benefits where monetary compensation was considered. The responsibility lies with the researcher to check how this applied to the particular country where the research was conducted and keep up to date with policy changes.

3.13.2 Participant selection: Describe how participants will be identified and selected

Participants in the research study included teachers involved in teaching at the Foundation Phase, HoDs and school principals. These individuals were selected from schools that had been identified before data collection. The school principals were selected because they were considered informative participants in the challenges of multi-grade classes.

On the other hand, the involvement of teachers and HoDs was based on the fact that they taught or were involved in the Foundation Phase of multi-grade teaching and learning. Only teachers who had taught in multi-grade classes for more than three years were selected for this research. Moreover, participants had to have been members of the SMT, which would make them aware of challenges that multi-grade teachers encounter in classrooms.

3.12.3 Privacy, confidentiality and anonymity

In this study, the researcher gave participants assurances of confidentiality and anonymity, and informed them about the intended use of the data (Best & Kahn, 2006). The researcher further explained to the participants that the information they provided would be treated with confidentiality and that neither their names nor their schools

would be mentioned in the study. The participants were also informed that they had a choice to participate or not and could withdraw their participation without penalty. In addition, the participants were requested to sign a consent form to agree to participate in the interview, use a tape recorder during the interview, and agree on lesson observations.

In addition, the researcher wrote a letter to the school principal requesting permission to conduct a study in the selected school. The researcher's letter indicated that confidentiality and anonymity would be upheld during the study and that the collected data would be kept in a safe place upon completion of the study. Furthermore, the participants signed consent letters prior to taking part in the research.

3.14 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter described the research design and methodology, including why the chosen research design was appropriate for this study. Moreover, the research population was described and the significance of the study was explained. In particular, the motivation of the study was to gain an understanding of the impact of multi-grade classes on teaching and learning in the selected schools. The research approach was also described, with particular attention to data collection methods, population and sampling, which involved describing where the participants were interviewed. The chapter further explained data analysis, research ethics, and trustworthiness, with particular reference to this research's credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability.

The next chapter focuses on the data presentation, analysis and interpretation of results.

CHAPTER 4: DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter 3 describes the research methodology used in this research study. This study aimed to assess challenges associated with selected multi-grade teaching of Foundation Phase teachers in the Joe Gqabi District, Eastern Cape Province. Moreover, this chapter presents the results of the data collected during the interviews and observation as guided by the study's title: Countering the challenges with multi-grade teaching of foundation phase teachers in the Joe Gqabi District, Eastern Cape Province. It also discusses how the data were analysed and interprets the results.

4.2 BACKGROUND DATA OF PARTICIPANTS

The first section reveals details on the background of the interviewed participants. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the schools and the participants. The analysis of collected data required the introduction of categories, for example, describing the extent of a participant's experience and their qualifications.

Table 4.1: Details of the participants

SCHOOLS	PARTICIPANTS	POSITION	YEARS OF EXPERIENCE	HIGHEST QUALIFICATION
SCHOOL A Principal 1	1	Principal	26	Bachelor of Education in Management
HOD 1	1	HOD	29	Advanced Certificate in Education
Teacher 1	1	Foundation Phase teacher	5	Bachelor of Education in Management

Teacher 2	1	Foundation Phase teacher	27	Advanced Certificate in Education
SCHOOL B Principal 2	1	Principal	26	Bachelor of Education in Management
HOD 2	1	HOD	22	BEd
Teacher 3	1	Foundation Phase teacher	24	ACE
Teacher 4		Foundation Phase teacher	5	Public Relations
SCHOOL C Principal 3	1	Principal	29	Bachelor of Education in Management
HOD 3	1	HOD	28	ACE
Teacher 5	1	Foundation Phase teacher	25	ACE
Teacher 6	1	Foundation Phase teacher	8	Diploma
SCHOOL D Principal 4	1	Principal	34	Master of Education Management
HOD 4	1	HOD	17	Bachelor of Education Honours

Teacher 7	1	Foundation Phase teacher	29	ACE
Teacher 8	1	Foundation Phase teacher	15	Bachelor of Education Honours

As shown in Table 4.1 above, one principal, one HoD, and two teachers from four schools participated in the research. Table 4.1 further highlights the participant's qualifications, age and experience in the field. As mentioned in Chapter 3, the principals were included because they possessed first-hand information and knowledge regarding the management of schools with multi-grade classes; the teachers and HoDs involved in the Foundation Phase were selected because they manage and/or teach multi-grade classrooms.

4.2.1 Experience (years)

The results shown in Table 4.1 reveal that in School 1, participants had experience ranging from five to 29 years. Only one Foundation Phase teacher had 5 years' experience, while their counterparts had more than 25 years. Almost a similar trend was shown in School B, where the participants' experience ranged from five to 26 years. For School B, one Foundation Phase teacher had 5 years' experience while their colleagues had more than 21 years. At School C, participants had taught or managed multi-grade Foundation Phase classrooms for eight to 29 years. Lastly, participants' experience in School D ranged from 15 to 34 years. Interestingly, the least experience in each school was a teacher involved in multi-grade classrooms. School D had the most experienced participants, while School B had the least.

4.2.2 Qualifications

Except for one participant in School B (Foundation Phase teacher), all the other participants had the requisite qualifications. This is critical for multi-grade classrooms because suitably qualified teachers tend to be more capable of managing a multi-

grade classroom than their under-or unqualified counterparts. In addition, the MoE (2007) attested that, in general, unqualified teachers report challenges that teachers with requisite qualifications do not report. This research reveals that most teachers had Advance Certificate Education (ACE) qualifications, while one had a Masters degree in Education Management.

As expected, teaching and learning in the selected schools were influenced by Bronfenbrenner's Theory (for example, the scarcity or unavailability of resources in the participating schools, values regarding achievement and perseverance, and the level of support from the government). Using Bronfenbrenner's Theory enabled the researcher to explore challenges associated with multi-grade teaching, particularly concerning the development of systems and individuals within these systems (Singal, 2006). Factors such as shortage of classrooms and teachers and lack of discipline affected learners' academic performance (Swart & Phasha, 2008). This study was also guided by the Montessori Educational Theory, a theoretical framework that is learner-oriented and characterised by mixed-aged learners that were supported with specialised educational materials (Kahya, 2012).

Thus, the qualitative analysis purpose was primarily to identify themes, that is, a thread within the responses supplied. Therefore, the study comprised 16 participants. The findings are presented according to the research objectives stated in Chapter 1, Section 1.7.

4.3 THEMES AND SUB-THEMES

According to Creswell (2009), data analysis involves activities pertaining to drawing up steps involved in data analysis, conducting different analyses, operations to ensure the correct understanding of data, presenting the data systematically, and making interpretations of the systematically analysed data refer to (refer to Ch.3, 3.10).

This study employed Onwuegbuzie's (2011) seven-step data analysis (refer to Ch.3, 3.10). These steps comprise triangulation, which is needed to ensure the reliability and trustworthiness of data. Thereafter, the data were presented in a descriptive and graphical manner, including data reduction. Data reduction was achieved through

data organisation and coding. Finally, the transformation of information was experimentally derived into corrected, ordered, and simplified forms.

For this research, raw data were collected by means of interviews, observation and focus groups, which were recorded using a recording device and transcribed verbatim. The researcher obtained a clearer understanding of the multi-grade concept and many more themes during the interviews and classroom observations. Table 4.2 below shows the questions that were converted into themes in order to organise the data appropriately.

Table 4.2: Selected themes and sub-themes used in the study

THEMES	SUB-THEMES
Understanding multi-grade teaching in Foundation Phase	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Definition of multi-grade teaching • Causes of multi-grade teaching • The effect of multi-grade teaching on learner academic performance
Challenges facing teachers in multi-grade teaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learner grouping • Learner discipline • Time management • Learner effectiveness
Challenges facing the HoDs in multi-grade teaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learner underperformance • Lack of training
Curriculum management in multi-grade classes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teaching methods • Learner-Teacher Support Materials (TSM) • Lesson planning • Learner assessment

Support programmes for multi-grade teaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher development • Training session
The perceptions of teachers on multi-grade teaching	
Strategies to ensure effective teaching and learning in multi-grade teaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher employment • Multi-grade training

The theories involve conceptual structures that are concerned with helping ensure that the nature of a situation is managed better (Donnell et al., 2009). Therefore, it can be said that theories include beliefs, objectives and concepts that can be used to explain the world (Kruger & Nel, 2005). With regard to a school environment, theories help teachers manage their tasks so that they would be able to achieve their goals (Kruger & Nel, 2005) (refer to Ch.1, 1.7).

While the researcher was collecting data from the selected schools, they were guided by Bronfenbrenner’s theory. It was noted earlier (refer to Ch.1, 1.7) that Sithwala (2014) views Bronfenbrenner’s Social Ecological Systems Theory as successful in a study that focussed on poverty and illiteracy in a rural area. Sithwala’s (2014) study was conducted in the Joe Gqabi Primary School, where poor infrastructure and poverty challenges abound. Therefore, this study revealed that Bronfenbrenner’s Theory affected teaching and learning in the multi-grade classrooms of the selected schools. For example, the supply of insufficient resources by the government to the selected schools negatively impacted teaching and learning. Therefore, Bronfenbrenner’s framework allowed the researcher to explore challenges associated with multi-grade teaching. Furthermore, the theory allowed the researcher to assess the development of systems and individuals within these systems (Singal, 2006) (refer to Ch.2, 2.2.3).

Apart from Bronfenbrenner’s Framework, this study was also guided by the Montessori Educational Theory. This learner-oriented theoretical framework involves mixed-aged learners with specialised educational materials (refer to Ch.2, 2.3). In addition, the

aforementioned educational materials were developed as guided by the specific developmental needs of learners (Lillard, 2008). Overall, this study was well aligned with both the theories described above.

The researcher visited four primary schools located in rural areas of the Joe Gqabi District and collected data from participants. Before data collection, consent forms were sent to the schools for the selected participants to sign. The researcher would arrive on the premises of the participating school in the morning and partake in the Morning Prayer session in the assembly with other teachers. Thereafter, she would be shown the multi-grade classrooms, staffroom, and principal's office.

With support from the school management, the researcher ensured that COVID-19 protocols were observed during and after data collection. The focus group interview conducted at each research site included two teachers who taught in multi-grade classrooms. Individual interviews were also conducted with the school principal, HoD and teachers at each research site. Learners and teachers were observed in classrooms where multi-grade teaching was carried out. According to Miller (2011), Bronfenbrenner's Bio-Ecological Model on Child Development comprises four systems (refer to Ch.2 page 13). The raw data collected through interviews and observations in this study were analysed, and the results were described and discussed as shown in the following sections.

4.4 UNDERSTANDING MULTI-GRADE TEACHING AT THE FOUNDATION PHASE

4.4.1 Definition of the term 'multi-grade teaching'

Checchi and De Paola (2018) (refer to Ch.2, 2.3.1) described multi-grade classes as two different grades located in the same classroom and taught by one teacher. Such an approach is used widely in many developed and developing countries (Hargreaves, 2001; Quail & Smyth, 2014).

During the interviews, the principals, HoDs and Foundation Phase teachers described multi-grade teaching.

Participants were asked: “What is your understanding of the concept of multi-grade teaching?” Two of the principals responded as follows:

The principals were asked to define what multi-grade teaching is. Some responded as follows:

Principal 1: *“Multi-grade is when you combine two grades in the same classroom taught by one teacher.”*

Principal 2: *“Multi-grade is when one teacher is responsible for teaching one or more classes in one classroom.”*

Quail and Smyth (2014) concur with the above definitions that, in general, multi-grade classrooms involve more than one grade and learners taught by one teacher in the same class (refer to Ch.2, 2.3). The above statements of the principals from the four schools align with the definitions of multi-grade as captured in the Urie Bronfenbrenner and Maria Montessori’s theory. According to these theories, multi-grade teaching involves teaching more than one grade, with learners in one classroom. Interestingly, some of the interviewed participants' understanding of the multi-grade concept was different from the definition shown in Chapter 2. This finding agrees with Joubert’s views (2010) in that one of the common challenges with multi-grade teaching is that it is not understood in the same way across the globe.

In Greece, the concept involves classrooms being assigned according to the number of teachers at a particular school (Brown, 2010:7). For example, a school with Grades 1 to 3 in which one teacher teaches the learners is referred to as mono-grade. On the other hand, a school in which two teachers teach is called a two-grade school. The question was for the participants to define multi-grade teaching and two of the participants responded as follows:

HoDs’ defined multi-grade teaching as follows:

HOD 1: *“According to my understanding, multi-grade teaching is when you combine two classes, and teach them as one teacher... You teach both classes.”*

“Multi-grade teaching is when you teach two grades in one class in a different language, for example, in Sesotho and isiXhosa.”

Different languages and ‘forced mixed grade’ are included in the definition of Multi-Grade Teaching (MGT) and this usually incorporates settings that were necessary and brought about by the need for enrolment. The repetition of the concept occurred in all the HoDs who participated; however, the definition by School B’s HoD was different from that of their counterparts. For example, they mentioned that the multi-grade class has two different home languages taught by a single teacher in the same classroom.

Teachers were asked the same question: “What is your understanding of the concept of multi-grade teaching?” One of the teacher responded as follows:

Teacher 1: “Multi-grade teaching combines two different grades. For example, I have Grades 1 and 2.”

Furthermore, during the focused group interviews, two sampled teachers from Schools B and D added that multi-grade teaching is:

Teacher 2: *“It is when you combine two different classes with different cognitive levels.”*

Teacher 4: *“It is when one teacher is responsible for teaching more than one grade.”*

According to the Department of Basic Education (2015) (refer to Ch.2, 2.3.3), multi-grade teaching refers to a classroom setting where a teacher teaches learners of various grades.

4.4.2 Circumstances leading to multi-grade teaching

Little (2004) stated that there is a reason for establishing multi-grade schools or classrooms (refer to Ch.2, 2.3.3). Teachers and policymakers took a decision of this nature; however, it can be necessitated by a shortage of learners and teachers.

Principals were asked: “Why did your school introduce multi-grade teaching?” Two of the participants responded as follows:

Principal 1: *“The principal does not introduce multi-grade; the Department of Education introduces it because the department is the employer. Schools conduct staff establishment, but it does not consider the teacher-learner ratio of 1:35 (due to the number of learners in the class against the one teacher, the school creates a multi-grade class). This means that the Department of Education creates multi-grade classes instead of posts.”*

Principal 2: *“Firstly, it is a shortage of teachers and a low enrolment of learners. For example, I have 14 learners in Grade 3 and 17 from another class in my class. Therefore, management decided to combine them.”*

Most responses from the participants cited the shortage of teachers and/or learners, which is prevalent in villages and could explain the prevalence of a multi-grade set-up. Little (2010) reported that the Eastern Cape Province is among many with multi-grade settings, particularly in schools located in farm and rural areas. The causes included the shortage of teachers (refer to Ch.1, 1.2). Overall, the sample participants from these schools indicated that their challenge was a shortage of teachers and low learner enrolment.

Participants were asked: “Why did your school introduce multi-grade teaching?” One participant responded as follows:

Teacher 4: *“The reason was that there were a few Sesotho learners and only two Sesotho teachers in this phase.”*

It was evident that among the reasons that caused multi-grade teaching in the targeted Joe Gqabi District Primary Schools, there was low enrolment and few teachers. According to the participants, the multi-grade teaching approach is stressful. Some of the challenges mentioned by participants from School D included that the school used two different languages, namely Sesotho and isiXhosa, which made it challenging for the multi-grade teacher. In addition, given the shortage of teachers, teachers were responsible for teaching four grades. Lastly, the teacher followed a curriculum and

timetable designed for a mono-grade school. These two reasons explain why the multi-grade set-up is common (Little, 2004) (refer to Ch.2, 3.22).

4.4.3 The effect of multi-grade teaching on learner academic performance

According to Linstrom and Lindahl (2011) (refer to Ch.2, 2.3.9), the multi-grade setting is not considered a problem in Sweden because it enhances learners' intellectual development. This is partly because under this approach, teachers prioritise paying more individual attention, which assists learners who perform poorly, a benefit hardly realised in mono-grade settings (Balfour, 2015). Furthermore, learners with learning difficulties who are integrated into multi-age classrooms exhibit improved academic performances due to increased contact time. Therefore, their performance improves when poor-performing learners from multi-grade classrooms are integrated into small groups.

Participants were asked: "How effective is multi-grade teaching for learners' education?" Two of the participants responded as follows:

Principal 2: *"The performance of learners could be better. Sometimes it's difficult because your focus is on a number of learners, so by the time you see that a learner is battling, it is probably too late. However, some are doing well – it depends on the individual's ability."*

Principal 4: *"The learners are trying their best. But there are challenges, particularly in language and maths. Most learners fail maths and language."*

In the responses recorded above, the principals made it clear that they believed that multi-grade teaching did not positively impact learners' performance. According to other participants, less competent learners got worse because the system did not allow for more time to provide individual attention. Checchi and De Paola (2018) reported the reluctance of most teachers in rural schools to adopt multi-grade teaching, which was informed by their view that the system was a second-rate teaching approach (refer to Ch.2, 2.3.1).

Moreover, its adverse effects on affected schools directly impact the education system. For example, when a multi-grade classroom teacher attends a workshop for a particular subject, the learners of other grades would miss out on teaching or the content from the workshop. Importantly, this has severe consequences for learners to acquire the requisite knowledge.

4.4.4 Challenges facing teachers of multi-grade classes

Participants were asked: “Can you briefly explain how you group your learners in the classroom?” Two of the participants responded as follows:

Teacher 2: *“I have two grades in this class; the first row is Grade 2, the middle row is Grade 3, and the third row is Grade 2. I mixed them deliberately because I don’t want them to copy each other.”*

Teacher 4: *“I teach two grades, but Grade 2 is separated from Grade 3. However, when I teach maths, I sometimes teach both grades the same topic, but the assessment level is different.”*

The responses above reveal that learners were arranged into separate groups according to their grades. In some cases, learners of different grades were mixed in groups. According to the teachers, having separate learner groups encouraged learners to help each other. When setting multi-grade classrooms, teachers ought to maintain stand-alone study areas that learners can use when they are done with their tasks while having initiatives to improve record-keeping (Kyne, 2005) (refer to Ch.2, 2.3.20). Notably, the multi-grade setting requires that learners be trained to cooperate (Brown, 2010).

Participants were asked: “How is learner discipline maintained in the classroom?” Four of the participants responded as follows:

Teacher 1: *“When I am busy with Grade 1 learners, I choose one learner from Grade 2 to control the noise levels. I do the same when I am teaching my Grade 1 learners.”*

Teacher 3: *“I start with Grade 3 since they understand better than other grades – I give them an activity and then teach the Grade 2’s. If one of the grades is experiencing challenges, I give them my undivided attention to ensure they understand the work. I also tell them to keep quiet and not make a noise. When I teach life skills, I encourage both grades to listen because the syllabus is similar, which helps me manage time.”*

Teacher 4: *“Firstly, I have classroom rules. My learners know the do’s and don’ts. For example, when they enter the class, they sanitize their hands, ensure their masks are worn and maintain social distancing. I’ve trained them to understand that I don’t want noise in the classroom... I also have group leaders. They know how to behave when I am busy with other grades.”*

Teacher 5: *“When I teach Grade 2, I take the Grade 3 learners outside. The same applies to the Grade 2 learners. The only issue with this is that the learners in the classroom look out the window, which disturbs me.”*

The responses above highlighted teachers’ difficulty when learners from more than one grade were mixed in the same classroom. According to the participants, it was hard to maintain discipline in a multi-grade classroom. The respondents confirmed that multi-grade teachers had to part-take in multiple tasks; thus, learners who were part of the system became ill-disciplined. The teachers stated that giving one grade an activity to work on while they were busy with another grade was one of the strategies to maintain discipline in a multi-grade classroom. Teachers had to leave some learners unattended while attending to learners of another grade. Such responses showed that teaching learners of varying ages and abilities in the same classroom were ineffective and distracting. Taole and Mncube (2012) (refer to Ch.1, 1.6.7) also point out that classroom management is another discipline problem regarding multi-grade teaching. Moreover, it was evident that rural school teachers in multi-grade classrooms were confronted with multiple challenges, mainly that learners’ grades or levels were different, it was seemingly impossible to discipline learners in a mixed-age classroom, and the children had to receive equal treatment.

4.4.5 Time management

Participants were asked: “How do you manage time and accommodate all learners in the same classroom?” Two of the participants responded as follows:

Teacher 4: *“Time is a challenge. For instance, the Foundation Phase learners are supposed to go home at 13h00, but I offer them extra classes since I have slow learners. There is also a feeding scheme from 09h00 to 10h00 and a break during this time. As teachers, this is costing us.”*

Teacher 5: *“I can’t complete my work in time because I have two languages and two grades in the same classroom.”*

From the statements above, it is evident that teachers did not have sufficient time to attend to the needs of each learner even though they said they were trying their best to help the learners. Their responses and the key finding of this study were that learners were not given individual attention nor received remedial activities. In addition, teaching more than two grades in one classroom increased the teacher's workload. Taole & Mncube (2012) add that teachers found it challenging to teach different grades simultaneously, assess them and follow a timetable as many challenges constrain multi-grade education. However, they found strategies to accommodate other learners (refer to Ch.2, 2.3.11). This is not surprising because other published studies on multi-grade classrooms have reported this challenge, namely Mulryan-Kyne (2005). He stated that some of the teachers involved in multi- grade settings in South Africa mentioned that the time was insufficient for them to address the needs of each grade and lack of learner discipline (refer to Ch.2, 2.3.20).

4.4.6 Effectiveness of teaching and learning

Participants were asked: “How effective is multi-grade teaching in learners’ education?” Three of the participants responded as follows:

Teacher 4: *“I see no difference because I ensure that the work done in mono-grade is also done in multi-grade. I try to ensure that my work doesn’t lack anything because the learners must pass. When doing extra classes, I*

ensure that I give learners homework, but some don't complete it because their parents don't assist them (they come from rural areas)."

Teacher 5: *"There is no effective teaching because they are slow when I assess them; they are very slow. I cannot rush into completing a syllabus. When the district officials visit, I need to get through a lot of work while learners struggle to understand what was already taught."*

Teacher 8: *"A few of them are effective, but some learners struggle due to the short time. I don't have time to conduct extra lessons because some learners use public transport to school."*

Learners in the classrooms of the schools that participated in this study were taught separately according to their grades. Within a multi-grade classroom, as the teacher attends to one grade, the learners that belong to the other grade would be assigned an assessment. That means that the teachers would only interact with the learners they would be busy with while the other group completes the unsupervised task. The participants revealed that such schools would not achieve effective teaching and learning if the number of teachers was not increased to match the high number of grades. The teachers shared a similar view during their interviews that under the current setting, largely, learners did not participate in lessons. The observations revealed that teachers conveyed information, and the learners listened. However, only a few questions were asked during the lessons as learners were struggling, which was stressful for the teachers.

4.4.7 Underperforming learners

Participants were asked: "How is the performance of learners studying in a multi-grade class?" The HODs responded as follows:

HOD 1: *"It is challenging because when you deal with one class, the other lacks. Therefore, the learners fail at the end of the year."*

HOD 4: *"They perform, but there is a lot of disturbance. For example, sometimes, when teaching a group of learners, the others listen attentively and can answer the questions posed to the first group."*

Participants identified the poor performance of learners as a challenge. This was partly because the setting did not allow teachers to attend to learners' needs. They also indicated that when learners progress from one grade to the next before they acquire the requisite skills, they struggle to grasp concepts in the next grade. The responses of the two HoDs revealed that multi-grade teaching did not yield positive results on learners' performance. They argued that teaching two grades with different curricula did not afford them adequate time to complete the syllabus. Some of the participants mentioned of less the performance of learners who were less competent intensified because there was no time for remedial work. Published literature reveals that there are little to no differences between multi-grade teaching and mono-grade achievements. Swart and Phasha (2008) concur that learners' academic performance was negatively impacted in multi-grade classrooms, which has been supported by many other studies (refer to Ch.2, 2.2.3).

4.4.8 Lack of training

Participants were asked: "Are there any training sessions to support teachers involved in multi-grade classes?" One HOD responded as follows:

HOD 2: *"Yes, it is available. They attended workshops before the COVID-19 pandemic, although it is easier to attend workshops now. If one of the teachers didn't attend the workshop during training, the other teacher(s) would receive information."*

It is evident from above that the lack of requisite training may have contributed to the challenges that the teachers were facing in multi-class settings. In particular, had teachers received training, this may have impacted their teaching and possibly caused challenges for multi-class teachers. Overall, combined or individually, these could have caused damage to learners' education and the school as a whole. Little (2009) found that most teachers in multi-grade classrooms in South Africa were "either untrained or only trained in single-grade," and they relied on a curriculum designed for mono-grade teaching, there is a shortage of appropriate material (Refer to Ch.2, 2.3.22).

4.4.9 Curriculum management in multi-grade classes

Participants also advanced that curriculum management was one of their challenges in multi-grade classes. They further indicated that it was difficult to deal with two different grades in the same class and use different curricula. Therefore, teachers were asked: "Which teaching methods do you use in the multi-grade classroom?" Four teachers responded as follows:

Teacher 6: *"I use cooperative learning to create an opportunity for learners to build relationships and learn to help each other."*

Teacher 1: *"I always apply scaffolding in my classroom because multi-grade learners struggle and don't receive attention like mono-grade learners."*

Teacher 2: *"I prefer to group my learners, which makes my work much easier because I mix them according to their cognitive level. I trained them to help each other without my help, particularly in discussing things like stories, because I don't have the time to complete the lesson in the syllabus."*

Teacher 7: *"I always provide fun learning activities and allow their learning to be challenged. However, I don't complete my lessons every day."*

Although the teachers did not seem confident about their teaching methods, they used various other methods, including peer and group. The literature shows that the aforementioned are two of the most effective in multi-grade teaching. Interestingly, many of the teachers interviewed mentioned said that they had used these even when teaching single-grade classes. The researcher sometimes noticed that the target teachers used different methods or were unsure of the methods. For example, while some learners were given a task to complete from their books, their counterparts would be taught to complete tasks independently. This view suggests that the teachers were referring to the textbook method. The lack of proper knowledge of the types of teaching methods could suggest that participants had not been adequately trained in multi-grade teaching. The participants allowed learners to work in groups and assist each other. Intriguingly, the teachers could not go through the entire syllabus even when using this approach. Berry (2001) argues that there are strategies that can assist learners in multi-grade. The main teaching methods utilised were collaborative

learning or the cooperative method. Overall, the selected teachers were unfamiliar with specific teaching methods for multi-grade teaching, such as peer tutoring (refer to Ch.1, 1.6.8).

4.4.10 Learner-Teacher Support Material (SMT)

The teacher was asked: “Which teaching method(s) does the teacher use?” The teacher responded as follows:

Teacher 4: *“I use the learner’s book and the teacher’s guide. I mostly use the NECT and DBE workbooks. I use workbooks because they have fun and memorable activities. I use the tracker book with an activity book and worksheets.”*

It is evident from the above that most of the schools lacked appropriate teaching materials. The available teaching material was intended for mono-grade classrooms; thus, hampering effective learning and teaching. The teacher also expressed that they had no choice but to use available teaching materials even if they were intended for a multi-grade setting. The teacher also stated that learners enjoyed lessons that had visual activities, which made the teacher’s job lighter. When teachers were supported with relevant teaching materials, they surpassed their challenges because of being resourceful. Therefore, teachers should be resourceful and given relevant resources for particular circumstances. In some cases, the lack of supply of materials for multi-grade teaching and support made teachers produce their own teaching material (Taole, 2014) (refer to Ch2. 5.3).

4.4.11 Lesson planning

The teachers were asked: “How do you plan your lessons?” Two of the teachers responded as follows:

Teacher 2: *“I plan two lessons for both grades because their cognitive level is the same. The new Grade 2 learners are struggling, and COVID-19 has made it easy for them. Children are rotating; not all of them come to school. This is a challenge itself because, by the time they return to school, they have*

forgotten everything there were previously taught. As a teacher, you need to provide a recap of the material.”

Teacher 5: *“I am planning for all grades because the cognitive level is not the same. It is a challenge, but I have to plan at the end of the day. I start with Grade 2, then move to Grade 1.”*

It is clear from the above that teachers' lesson plans were planned differently. While others planned lessons for each grade, their colleagues planned for the other grade. A participant mentioned that they prepared one lesson for Grade 3, but it would also be taught to Grade 2 learners. Some participants only separated lessons in order to meet the expectations of curriculum advisors, who insisted on seeing a lesson plan for each grade. The inspectors did not consider that the teachers were teaching in a multi-grade classroom. The literature places much emphasis on the value of planning lessons, particularly for multi-grade classrooms, because teachers involved in such settings are expected to plan instructions for each grade carefully (Berry, 2001). Teachers are encouraged to adopt multi-faceted plans and decide whether a particular lesson will focus on the 'whole class', a 'small group' or 'individuals' (Thomas & Shaw, 1993). Furthermore, the teachers should consider that learners' development in a classroom typically happens at different stages (Joubert, 2010), and he believed there is a need for researcher approaches that directly address practice (refer to Ch.1, 1.1).

4.9.12 Learner assessment

Teachers were asked: “What challenges do you experience when assessing learners?” Three of the teachers responded as follows teachers:

Teacher 1: *“When it comes to the curriculum, it depends on skill, the willingness of educators, and the support from your school and each other. I work with willing people; as the head of the school, I have the skills to deal with learners in the Foundation Phase. I know how to help them read and write.”*

Teacher 7: *“Yes, because I have to assess one subject for all grades at different cognitive levels. I assess the same thing in language and mathematics and make minor changes.”*

Teacher 8: *“Yes, because I have to assess all grades at once and develop an assessment for all grades.”*

Most of the teachers above reveal that the learners were assessed separately and according to their grades – this approach was recommended by the policy document. According to the participants, two different tasks would be prepared for the assessment of multi-grade classrooms. However, the assessment of subjects like language was conducted separately. With regard to tasks involving informal assessments, the same tasks were used because of the assumption that the content was almost the same. Interestingly, the common assessment tasks received from the district office were set on a per grade basis. This suggests that, although different grades are placed in the same classroom, they were not treated as if they were the same. When learners were assessed separately, it meant more work for the teacher, which was time-consuming as teachers sometimes spent the day administering a test for one grade, particularly in the lower grades and all these responsibilities were assigned by one teacher (Hargreaves, 2001) (refer to Ch.2, 2.3.1).

4.4.13 Support programmes

With regard to support programmes for multi-grade teaching, four of the sampled teachers argued that they did not receive any support from curriculum advisors to teach in multi-grade classes. Principals was asked: “Do you get any support in the form of workshops from the Department of Education?” principal responded as follows:

Principal 1: *Yes, teachers get workshops, but to train someone who doesn't implement the skills is useless. So the workshops are available, but they are not.*

The same question was posed to the teachers, and three of them responded as follows:

Teacher 3: *“Yes, we get support as mono-grade or single-grade; however, we don't receive any support as multi-grade teachers.”*

Teacher 4: *“No, there is no support. We don't even complete the syllabus.”*

Teacher 8: *“There is no extra support in multi-grade teaching; I attend workshops separately. For example, I attend Grade 1 workshops separately from the Grade 2 workshops.”*

The same question was also posed to HOD 2, who responded as follows:

HOD 2: *“Visit the school and check if the information they shared is being implemented because they take information, and when they have to implement it, it becomes very difficult.”*

The teachers stated that they were not involved in programmes that could develop them because the DoE didn't offer any. Although one teacher was studying part-time, it was unrelated to multi-grade teaching. They argued that multi-grade teaching was exhausting and strenuous. The researcher acknowledges that through multi-grade education, learners in rural areas receive an education from the teachers, which suggests that multi-grade teaching carries out the function of providing what is possible in terms of education to children (refer to Ch.1, 1.6.2) (Juvane, 2005b).

Unfortunately, the government neglects rural schools, and as a result, the teachers carry a heavy workload. The teachers believed that if the government hired more teachers, particularly those trained in teaching multi-grade classrooms, it could improve the plight of such schools. Of the interviewed participants, a few attended workshops, which were far between and, at times, irrelevant. For example, a participant reported that a workshop they attended was instead a briefing and that they were promised that further workshops would follow; however, they never took place. Although the participants were multi-grade teachers, they only attended workshops intended for single-grade teaching. Moreover, it was noted earlier that the teachers could not cover all the content required in the allocated time. Therefore, the Department of Basic Education should revisit the curriculum plan and make changes that accommodate all types of education.

4.4.14 Teachers' perceptions regarding multi-grade teaching

The teachers were asked: "What is your honest opinion about multi-grade teaching?" Five of the sampled teachers responded as follows:

Teacher 1: *"Multi-grade teaching causes poor syllabus completion – it disadvantages learners in such classes more than those in mono-grade. Having 50 learners in the classroom is better than having 15 learners from different grades."*

Teacher 3: *"It doesn't sit well with me; it is very stressful. The problem is that this school has two languages: isiXhosa and Sesotho, so you can imagine the environment we are working in since there are a few of us."*

Teacher 4: *"As for me, multi-grade teaching opened my mind. It has taught me patience with learners and made me more than just a teacher to these children. Most of the learners in my class come from poor backgrounds and are orphans. These challenges made me realise that these kids need this education, and their future lies in my hands."*

Teacher 7: *"I think it is not good because it is difficult to assess them. Sometimes I teach them, but most don't understand. Then, it becomes difficult to go back and make them understand due to time constraints. "*

Teacher 8: *"Multi-grade is very difficult; it also affects you as the teacher because you forget that you have two grades. Sometimes I spend time in one grade and forget about the other. It causes stress because you go home knowing that some learners are slow learners and need extra time to understand what is being taught. It makes me feel very guilty."*

From the responses in above, it can be concluded that the teachers' attitudes toward multi-grade teaching were negative. Teachers felt that they were overloaded with work in multi-grade classrooms. As a result, they argued that there was a lack of time for remedial work, suggesting that learners who struggled to understand concepts did not get individual assistance from teachers. The respondents also argued that although they had a few learners in their classrooms but taught many subjects – they also complained about not getting enough time for themselves. It was also revealed that

teachers also had to perform school administrative duties despite being overloaded with classroom responsibilities.

It is important to understand the teachers' perspective. Some teachers reported difficulties in enforcing discipline (particularly in mixed-age classrooms), they had to ensure that all learners in multi-grade classrooms would be subjected to equal treatment, lack and/or shortage of requisite support materials needed to meet learners' needs, and non-prioritisation of school. Furthermore, perceptions can be addressed by ensuring that the multi-grade teachers ought to be equipped with the required skills. From the respondents' views, multi-grade teaching affected teaching and learning. The participants expressed frustrations at the lack of support from the department and parents regarding teaching in a multi-grade classroom. Therefore, a multi-grade environment should be established; and teachers should be equipped with the required skill set (Stone & Burriss, 2019) (refer to Ch.2, 2.3.13).

4.4.15 Strategies to ensure effective teaching and learning

The principals, HOD and teachers were asked: "In your opinion, what strategies could be implemented to ensure effective teaching and learning in multi-grade classes?" Principals stated the following:

Principal 2: *"Multi-grade teaching mostly happens in the Foundation Phase; it is a problem for the Foundation Phase because children in this phase are playful. You need to pay 100% attention; if you miss it, you will find them playing. Thus, I would encourage them to stay with their learner-teacher ratio system. I think the former system was better. Additionally, the government should supply schools with teachers for each subject. Most teachers are frustrated with multi-grade teaching to the extent that they believe they did not do much to achieve their goals, although there isn't much they can do about it."*

Principal 3: *"Firstly, we accepted the situation and are used to the extent some schools are better than them. We ensure that learners return home with something."*

Principal 4: *“Yes, one of the teachers teaching the multi-grade class mentioned that she does mental maths in both grades simultaneously to save time. But, she conducts the other subjects separately, although there are many problems, such as taking one of the grades outside so that they don’t disturb the other class during teaching.”*

The same question was posed to the HODs, and four of them responded as follows:

HOD 1: *“In my opinion, if the government hired the School Governing Body post educators to train the Educator’s Assistance in reading and writing so that the teacher could have an extra hand.”*

HOD 2: *“If we are given an opportunity to attend multi-grade workshops... The Department of Education should also supply us with multi-grade resources. If we attend workshops as a multi-grade school, we will not have a lot of work – similar to mono-grade schools. When teaching in multi-grade classrooms, they teach according to learners’ pace; they don’t rush to complete the syllabus.”*

HOD 3: *“The government should create posts for additional teachers, and each class should have a ratio of 35:1.”*

HOD 4: *“Build more classrooms and create posts for teachers. Parents should also be part of the learner’s education.”*

The same question was also posed to the teachers, and four of them responded as follows:

Teacher 2: *“I keep my learners occupied with work; this helps me to maintain discipline. It is crucial because you cannot teach a class while other learners are making a noise. It is also important to know learners’ cognitive levels so that you can group them after teaching a lesson. I give them extra time and assist those who are struggling.”*

Teacher 3: *“The government should provide scholar transport and allocate Sesotho learners to Sesotho teachers because there aren’t any in this school. It would be ideal if we were to only be left with isiXhosa learners. The other*

option is for the government to employ Sesotho teachers because we are multilingual and have a shortage of teachers.”

Teacher 6: *“The government needs to employ teachers (there are many unemployed teachers, yet the profession is being abused). They are working without payment because they see a situation in these schools and decide to volunteer and help children. Most teachers are dying from stress and depression because of such challenges. This issue is strenuous, and if the teacher dies, it won’t change anything – the teachers will simply divide the subject and continue teaching. The other reason for a limited enrolment is that we are struggling and don’t have sufficient time.”*

Teachers proposed that the DoE needed to employ teachers without considering the number of learners in a school. They argued that effective teaching and learning would only be achieved if the number of teachers in a school equalled the number of grades. These responses reflected that teachers were sceptical about ensuring effective teaching and learning in multi-grade classes. To them, the only way out was to have more teachers in these schools. They proposed that the department should not consider the number of learners in a school when allocating teachers, but the number of grades in that school. One teacher suggested that it would be better to allocate five teachers to all small schools to ease the burden.

The principals also argued that there was nothing that they could do except employing more teachers. They argued that learners’ performance in multi-grade schools could not be compared with that of learners in single-grade schools. One participant mentioned that one teacher could not be expected to teach all subjects in a grade and produce good results. Modern policymakers and teachers acknowledge that collaboration between parents and communities enhances teaching and learning. Overall, teachers, parents and learners should support learning in order to improve the results of multi-grade classrooms (Bua & Martin, 2020) (refer to Ch.2, 2.3.22).

4.5 ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF DATA OBTAINED THROUGH LESSON OBSERVATION

Table 4.3: Number of learners enrolled in the school during data collection

	Grades Combined	Number of Learners per Grade	Total Number of Learners in a Class
School 1	Grade 1	16	29
	Grade 2	13	
School 2	Grade 2	9	23
	Grade 3	1	
		4	
School 3	Grade 2	11	25
	Grade 3	14	
School 4	Grade 2	14	31
	Grade 3	17	

Table 4.3 above shows that the multi-grade classes had the maximum number of learners permitted in a class – the Department of Basic Education prescribes a learner-teacher ratio of 35.9:1. This suggests that one teacher should be responsible for 35.9 learners, rounded to 36 learners. Moreover, it is clear from Table 4.3 above that multi-grade teachers had to contend with teaching a classroom with fewer learners. This also confirms that there was indeed a work overload for these teachers as they had to teach two different grades using content prepared for a mono-grade timetable.

4.6 CLASSROOM INTERACTION

4.6.1 Involvement of learners in both grades

School 1: *“Yes, all learners are involved because Grades 1 and 2 are taught the same syllabus; this is why they are engaging.”*

School 2: *“Yes, they are taught life skills. The topic is about the types of food groups; therefore, the teacher involves both grades.”*

School 3: *“No, she doesn’t involve both grades because she takes the one grade outside, while the taught grade remains behind.”*

School 4: *“The teacher involves both grades in the classroom, but there is a lot of disturbance in class.”*

Learners in School 3 were taught separately (according to their grades), while the other grade was outside completing a task without any supervision. The teachers only interacted with the group they were busy with. This was also mentioned during the teachers’ interviews. In addition, the researcher noted that learners were mainly involved in the lesson when the teacher was teaching both grades. Teachers conveyed information while learners listened with fewer questions asked.

4.6.2 How is learner discipline maintained in the classroom

School 1: *“Discipline is not maintained because learners from the other grade are not involved in the lesson.”*

School 2: *“The learners from both grades are disciplined because they are involved in the lesson and activity.”*

School 3: *“Discipline is maintained because the one grade goes outside, while a few learners are watching from inside the classroom.”*

School 4: *“The teacher was doing her best to maintain discipline, but the learners concentrate for approximately 5 minutes then make a noise again, particularly learners who have completed their task.”*

The teachers were unable to maintain discipline, particularly in the lower grades. While the teacher was busy with one group, the other group (regardless of the fact that they had been given a task to complete) would be making a noise; thus, interrupting the other lesson by reporting each other to the teacher. This confirms the responses that the participants shared during the interviews. When the teacher asked a question directed to a particular grade, learners in the other grade (particularly the higher grade)

shouted the answers out without the teacher asking them. During the observation, the researcher noted that learners from other grades would be standing outside and looking into the classroom during teaching. From what the researcher observed above, it can be concluded that the teachers are frustrated with multi-grade teaching; thus, affecting learning.

4.6.3 Teaching methods used by teachers in the multi-grade classes

School 1: *“Cooperative learning because all learners are involved and cooperating in the lesson.”*

School 2: *“The teacher involves all learners in the lesson and opens a discussion to all learners.”*

School 3: *“The teacher used different methods while asking learners questions based on their abilities; she ensured no one was left behind.”*

School 4: *“The teacher taught one grade while the other grade worked independently.”*

During the observation, the researcher noted that various teaching methods were used. According to Berry (2001), approaches to instruction that address the needs of all levels of achievement in primary schools are required. He described a strategy that can be used, namely cooperative group work and differentiated whole-class teaching. In the lessons observed, the teacher was the depositor of knowledge while learners were the recipients. Teachers read from the textbook or workbook and gave learners tasks. All the teachers observed indicated that they used the teacher and the textbook method.

4.6.4 Teaching in line with the lesson plan

School 1: *“No, she taught them using her own experience; there is no written lesson plan.”*

School 2: *“She used a tracking book for both grades; however, the teacher mixed the information and made one lesson plan.”*

School 3: *“Yes, because she teaches Grade 2 separately using appropriate grade resources. She also teaches the other grade separately.”*

School 4: *“Yes, she prepared a lesson for both grades.”*

From the information above, it is clear that some teachers used their own experience when teaching; they did not plan a lesson to teach. Those who had lesson plans kept them in their files, which they did not follow. Most of the teachers used workbooks. From this finding, it can be deduced that lesson plans were done and kept so that they would be produced in case a curriculum advisor visited the school. During the interviews with the teachers, some participants indicated that they prepared their lessons separately according to their grades because curriculum advisors expect to see them when they visit their schools. Other Foundation Phase teachers were provided lesson plans by the DoE, but did not teach according to these plans.

4.6.5 Maintenance of learner discipline in multi-grade classes

School 1: *“A few learners are trying to talk during an activity, and the teacher shouts at them to keep quiet.”*

School 2: *“The learners are behaving because the teacher combined both grades and is teaching them the same thing.”*

School 3: *“The learners are well-behaved because they are not disturbed by learners of another grade.”*

School 4: *“The teacher is keeping the other grade busy with an activity while she is teaching the other grade.”*

During the observation, the researcher noted that the learners made an unbearable noise inside the classroom before the lesson started. Therefore, the teacher gave the other grade an activity to keep them busy while teaching the other grade.

4.7 CHAPTER SUMMARY

In this chapter, the researcher analysed and interpreted the participant's responses according to the themes developed from the interview questions regarding the challenges experienced by teachers of multi-grade classes in primary schools in the Joe Gqabi District. In addition, data obtained through lesson observation were also analysed, interpreted and then triangulated with participants' responses. The analysis reveals that multi-grade teachers face challenges and are disillusioned about multi-grade teaching.

The next chapter summarises the findings, recommendations and conclusions of the study. The study aimed to suggest strategies to promote quality in teaching and learning in a multi-grade setting. Another recommendation is to consider how teacher training interventions succeed or fail in preparing teachers for a multi-grade setting. The study found that teachers in multi-grade classrooms experience many challenges, including learner discipline, underperformance, time management, incomplete syllabus, using a mono-grade curriculum, a shortage of learning materials, and a lack of training and support in multi-grade teaching. The recommendations for future research based on the study's findings are put forward; they aim to address the challenges experienced by teachers of multi-grade classes in order to implement the curriculum effectively. The DoE should also provide training in multi-grade teaching for professional staff such as teachers. This could empower them with the necessary knowledge to support learners in the multi-grade classroom.

CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Multi-grade classroom settings are established due to many reasons, including low learner enrolment. This practice is common, particularly in the rural areas of South Africa. In this final chapter of the dissertation, the researcher outlined the summary of each chapter. The study aimed to assess challenges faced by Foundation Phase teachers involved in multi-grade classrooms in the Joe Gqabi District. Multi-grade teaching is when one teacher is responsible for teaching more than one grade in the same classroom simultaneously. The previous chapter analysed and interpreted data obtained during focus group interviews, individual interviews, and lesson observations. The study was conducted in four schools through interviews with the principal, HoD, and two teachers. In total, four participants from each school were interviewed.

The researcher conducted a study to achieve the following objectives: (1) to understand the concept of multi-grade teaching; (2) to explore the challenges encountered by teachers in multi-grade teaching; (3) to determine the challenges associated with multi-grade teaching in the Foundation Phase; and, (4) to identify strategies to alleviate the challenges encountered by teachers in multi-grade classes.

This chapter also presents a summary of Chapters 1 to 4. It further presents recommendations and suggestions for future research. Finally, the limitations that emerged during the research process are discussed, and the chapter ends with a conclusion.

5.2 OVERVIEW OF THE CHAPTERS

The key concepts of the study are described in Chapter 1. Chapter 1 focussed on introducing the study through a description of a conceptual and theoretical framework in which the study was guided, the research methodology and design, and the study's findings.

The first chapter described the research background on the title of this study, namely “Countering the challenges with multi-grade teaching of Foundation Phase teachers in the Joe Gqabi District, Eastern Cape Province.” The problem of the study was also addressed, with particular reference to gaps in current research on the challenges associated with multi-grade teaching in the Foundation Phase and ways of countering these challenges (Berry, 2010). Thereafter, the study introduced the study’s main aim, which was to “develop strategies that foundation phase teachers can use to counter challenges associated with multi-grade teaching.” The study’s sample size was described in Chapter 1. It involved four primary schools in the Joe Gqabi District that were purposefully sampled to understand the views of participants experienced in management and teaching multi-grade classrooms. The participants included principals, HODs and Foundation Phase teachers. Chapter 1 included a description of the materials and methods used in collecting data, its analysis, presentation, interpretation, and discussion. The qualitative approach was selected because it fosters realistic research into everyday living, and direct observations can be made. Therefore, the results are most likely accurate and lead to informed conclusions (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006).

Chapter 2 reviewed published and unpublished literature on the study’s topic, that is, literature concerning multi-grade teaching or settings reported in developing countries. The literature reviewed also outlined components of multi-grade teaching in the South African context. In particular, it focused on challenges experienced by teachers who teach in the foundation phase in selected schools in the Joe Gqabi District. The literature background sought to answer the question: What strategies do foundation phase teachers use to counter multi-grade teaching challenges? Furthermore, the reviewed literature suggested solutions to mitigate some of the challenges plaguing multi-grade settings (Quail & Smyth, 2014). The second chapter described the selected theoretical frameworks suitable for the study. According to Kuada (2012), these theoretical frameworks enable researchers to connect concepts. The frameworks were selected to better understand the concept of multi-grade teaching in classrooms.

Chapter 3 focussed on the research design and methods as guided by qualitative concepts. Through this approach, the researcher aimed to understand the challenges facing Foundation Phase teachers involved in multi-grade education. Therefore, the researcher collected data through face-to-face interviews. This chapter revealed that the research paradigm used was the interpretivist paradigm, this was largely because such a paradigm would allow the participants an opportunity to express their views on the study's topic. In brief, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, observations by the researcher, analysis of hard copy documents, and a focus group interview.

Moreover, the researcher selected sixteen (16) participants, comprising eight (8) teachers, four (4) Heads of Departments, and four (4) principals. In Chapter 3, trustworthiness was described, particularly during the individual and focus group interviews. Other sections of this chapter included the research ethics, which guided the researcher in ensuring the study's participants' dignity, confidentiality, and privacy.

In Chapter 4, the raw data were presented, analysed and discussed. The first section of the chapter reveals details on the background, particularly the qualifications of the interviewed participants. The researcher used pseudonyms instead of the participants' real names. A total of 16 participants (four from each school) took part in the study. For this research, raw data were collected through interviews, observation, and focus groups, which were recorded using a recording device and transcribed verbatim. Participants were requested to sign consent forms before they took part in the study. The COVID-19 regulations and guidelines stipulated by the National Department of Health in South Africa as per the alert level were followed to ensure that participants were not exposed to the risk of contracting the virus. Lastly, the set questions were converted into themes in order to organise the data appropriately. The themes are discussed below.

5.3 SUMMARY OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

The overall findings of the study can be summarised into the following themes:

THEME 1: The multi-grade teaching concept defined

Quail and Smyth (2014) define a multi-grade classroom as one in which more than one grade group are taught simultaneously in a single classroom. Therefore, the researcher looked for key phrases, particularly those included Quail and Smyth's (2014) definition, when presenting data from the participants and whether these concepts occurred from all the principals, HoDs and teachers who participated in the study.

THEME 2: Factors contributing to the establishment of multi-grade classrooms

The following causes contributed to the establishment of multi-grade classroom settings: a shortage of teachers, low learner enrolment, and the need for classrooms. When assessing the failures associated with multi-grade classroom settings, the participants criticised the DBE for its failure to employ qualified teachers to teach in multi-grade classrooms. The researcher viewed these challenges as severe and qualified to render teaching and learning ineffective in the schools. Moreover, the challenges affected the learners' performance and the overall performance of the schools.

THEME 3: Effects of multi-grade teaching on learners' academic performance

This study indicated that multi-grade teaching had a negative impact on the academic performance of the affected learners. The participants stated that multi-grade teaching did not improve learners' performance in the selected schools. Interestingly, the study discovered that one of the negative effects contributing to learners' poor academic performance was that some teachers had not been adequately trained to teach in multi-grade classrooms. Poor performance of learners taught in rural multi-grade classrooms was also reported by Checchi and De Paola (2018). Moreover, learners were incompetent relative to their counterparts in mono-grade classrooms because the system did not give them more time to provide individual attention.

THEME 4: Challenges facing teachers in multi-grade teaching include grouping learners, discipline and managing time

Overall, the multi-grade teachers who partook in this study experienced difficulties concerning grouping learners, maintaining discipline and managing time. This was complicated because learners from different grades occupied one classroom and in such a setting. The teachers mentioned that they used discipline in a multi-grade setting by giving one grade an activity to work on while the teachers would be busy with another grade. The study also revealed that, unfortunately, the teachers did not get time to attend to the needs of individual learners. Indeed, the teacher mentioned that they were trying their level best to help the learners; however, having to teach more than two grades in one classroom increased their workload.

THEME 5: Effectiveness of teaching and learning

Participants revealed that under the current settings of the multi-grade classroom, teachers had to focus on one grade and provide a task to other grades to complete without any supervision by the teacher. However, the study also revealed that the system could be effective as teachers employed in a multi-grade school are sufficient to attend all grades. Other than that, there would not be effective learning.

THEME 6: Underperforming learners

Participants in the study emphasised that the poor performance of the learners was partly because they did not receive adequate attention from their teachers. Additionally, the participants reported that the widespread practice of teaching different grades using different curricula meant they had little time to complete the curriculum.

THEME 7: Lack of requisite training by teachers

The findings of this study revealed that lack of training or training in the requisite subject area contributed to the challenges that the teachers were facing in the selected multi-class settings. The participants also revealed that the lack of adequate training of teachers who taught in multi-grade negatively impacted the setting. Furthermore, poor training contributed to poor education and resulted in multi-grade schools. Titus (2004) revealed that the lack of requisite qualifications by teachers involved in multi-grade classrooms in South Africa was common as some teachers were “either

untrained or only trained in single-grade” and relied on a curriculum designed for mono-grade teaching.

THEME 8: Teaching methods

The study’s results revealed that the participants, particularly the teachers, had not familiarised themselves with teaching methods used in multi-grade classrooms. These include peer-and-group methods, which ranked among the most effective strategies in multi-grade teaching. This study showed that some participants used methods for use in single-grade classes. For example, the participants allowed learners to work in groups to assist each other. Moreover, the study found that, at times, teachers grouped learners according to their level of understanding. Overall, the study indicated that teaching multi-grade classrooms using different methods improved learners' academic performance.

THEME 9: Learner-teacher support material

Chapter 4 indicates that most of the interviewed teachers lacked the appropriate resources. In particular, the available teaching material was intended for single-grade classrooms. Furthermore, participants stated that learners enjoyed a lesson that included visual activities, which made the teacher's job less difficult in multi-grade classrooms. The fact that teaching material was not readily available to teachers affected both teachers and learners because there would be limited time to complete a syllabus of a multi-grade classroom. Therefore, teachers needed to be given relevant resources timeously. In some cases, the lack of and/or untimely supply of teaching material for multi-grade teaching and support made teachers mark their own teaching materials (Taole, 2014).

THEME 10: Lesson plan

It became evident that lesson plans were done differently in the selected schools. For example, the study revealed that participants planned lessons for one of the two grades in a classroom while others planned for the other grade. It was also revealed that the participants separated their lesson plans because curriculum advisors visited their school and requested to see a lesson plan for a specific grade.

THEME 11: Learner assessment

The assessment of learners in the selected multi-grade classrooms was based on the recommendations of the policy document. The teachers prepared different tasks while learners were assessed separately in formal assessment tasks for languages.

THEME 12: Support programmes

The participants revealed that they were not involved in programmes that developed their skills to enable their improved teaching of multi-grade classes. In addition, they argued that multi-grade teaching was exhausting, and teachers did not teach the content timely. Therefore, they suggested hiring more teachers in multi-grade classrooms in rural settings.

THEME 13: Perceptions of teachers on multi-grade teaching

Overall, the attitude of the interviewed teachers towards multi-grade teaching was negative partly because teachers were overloaded with work. They also argued a lack of time for remedial work, suggesting that learners who struggled to understand concepts did not receive individual assistance from teachers.

THEME 14: Strategies to ensure effective teaching and learning in multi-grade teaching

Of the suggested strategies, this study recommends that the DoE should appoint more teachers. In addition, the number of teachers in a multi-grade school should equal the number of grades. The participants concurred with the above, suggesting that appointing more teachers would ease the burden on the current teachers.

The study further proposed that the DBE should revise the curriculum. Additionally, the DoE should consider the number of grades instead of the number of learners when allocating teachers to schools. Lastly, the study recommends cooperation between policy-makers, parents and teachers.

5.4 RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations were made based on the research findings of the study. These recommendations are intended to address the challenges foundation phase teachers encounter in multi-grade classes.

5.4.1 Recommendations to the Department of Education (DoE)

- Enforce professional teacher development (CPTD), particularly in the multi-grade setting to help improve teachers' skills.
- Training should also be provided to curriculum advisors to empower them with the necessary knowledge needed to support teachers in multi-grade classes.
- To address placing two or more grades in one classroom, the DoE should ensure that each multi-grade classroom is made up of a maximum of two grades.
- The South African government ought to recognise the multi-grade setting, facilitate and support it, and give it special attention.
- Learner-centred activities may form part of the curriculum.
- A variety of activities should be included for each learner to get adequate attention, have a chance to learn in a group, and have a teacher facilitate their learning. That way, learners in higher grades would help their counterparts in lower.
- Instructional materials relevant to a grade should be provided, including a small library, charts, and pictures.
- Assessment strategies should accommodate teachers' schedules, and workshops should be organised to familiarise teachers with them.
- The subject content themes in multi-grade classes should be reduced or merged where possible.

5.4.2 Recommendations to the SMT (School Management Team)

- The first recommendation is that multi-grade classrooms should have a separate curriculum. This would enable teachers to teach a common theme to several grades, thereby reducing the teachers' workload.

- The Department of Basic Education should plan workshops and seminars to improve teaching and learning in multi-grade schools.
- School principals who mismanage multi-grade schools or classrooms should be punished.
- Principals should be encouraged (or incentivised) to upgrade their skills in order to be up-to-date with the latest developments in the curriculum.

5.4.3 Recommendations to the teachers

- Multi-grade teaching should form part of the teacher training programmes. These would help newly-appointed teachers in schools with multi-grade classes.
- Since multi-grade teachers are responsible for more than one grade at a time, they should be enticed with special incentives like a bonus or increased salary to encourage them to produce better results.
- Teachers in multi-grade classroom situations should be offered special training to overcome the challenges plaguing the setting.
- Teachers involved in multi-grade classrooms should embrace open-task activities that involve writing ideas.
- Teachers can design learning materials by using available materials in their locality or schools.
- School timetables can be altered to accommodate a multi-grade classroom. For example, alterations could include lengthening the teaching periods.
- Teachers should be encouraged to consult and co-plan lessons with fellow school teachers.

5.5 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

The study on multi-grade teaching in primary schools can be explored further. The researcher recommends the following further studies on multi-grade teaching in primary schools:

- Learner's performance in multi-grade classes and parental involvement.
- How schools with multi-grade classes are managed and whether the government assists them.
- An assessment of the available literature on outdated multi-grade classrooms, particularly in the South African context.
- A focus on the appropriate curriculum for multi-grade classrooms.
- Teachers should receive adequate exposure to the curriculum during teaching and learning in multi-grade classrooms because the CAPS document is designed for a single class.
- Appropriate teaching strategies for use in multi-grade classrooms.
- Training or support intervention required by multi-grade teachers.

5.6 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study's limitations are as follows:

- The case study involved public primary schools in a rural setting; thus, the findings are not generalisable to all multi-grade classrooms, schools, or settings.
- The participants feared being recorded because they assumed departmental representatives would listen to the tapes.
- Some of the selected participants were uncomfortable with the interviews being conducted in English. They believed that the researcher would judge their language barrier, exposing them to others.
- Five of the ten multi-grade schools that were selected to participate in the study were from a particular district. This may have limited the validity of the study.
- The study results could not be generalised to the wider population because the study had a few participants, and the school was based in a rural area.

5.7 CONCLUSION

The study identified poor curriculum design, teachers overloaded with work, poor classroom management, lack of discipline, poor time management, learner performance, and lack of support as challenges afflicting multi-grade classrooms. Moreover, participants from the study concluded that multi-grade classrooms would not be successful unless the challenges were addressed. Thus, the teachers ensured that learners received individual, group, and collaborative learning in multi-grade teaching. Lastly, the findings revealed that the multi-grade classroom setting in the selected schools negatively impacts the learner's education.

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APPENDIX A: ETHICAL CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE



UNISA COLLEGE OF EDUCATION ETHICS REVIEW COMMITTEE

Date: 2021/07/07

Ref: **2021/07/07/62012738/09/AM**

Name: Ms N THOBI

Student No.:62012738

Dear Ms N THOBI

Decision: Ethics Approval from
2021/07/07 to 2024/07/07

Researcher(s): Name: Ms N THOBI
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Title of research:

**Countering the challenges with multi-grade teaching of Foundation Phase teachers
in the Joe Gabi district, Eastern Cape Province**

Qualification: MEd Educational Management

Thank you for the application for research ethics clearance by the UNISA College of Education Ethics Review Committee for the above mentioned research. Ethics approval is granted for the period 2021/07/07 to 2024/07/07.

*The **medium risk** application was reviewed by the Ethics Review Committee on 2021/07/07 in compliance with the UNISA Policy on Research Ethics and the Standard Operating Procedure on Research Ethics Risk Assessment.*

The proposed research may now commence with the provisions that:

1. The researcher will ensure that the research project adheres to the relevant guidelines set out in the Unisa Covid-19 position statement on research ethics attached.
2. The researcher(s) will ensure that the research project adheres to the values and principles expressed in the UNISA Policy on Research Ethics.



University of South Africa
Preller Street, Muckleneuk Ridge, City of Tshwane
PO Box 392 UNISA 0003 South Africa
Telephone: +27 12 429 3111 Facsimile: +27 12 429 4150
www.unisa.ac.za

3. Any adverse circumstance arising in the undertaking of the research project that is relevant to the ethicality of the study should be communicated in writing to the UNISA College of Education Ethics Review Committee.
4. The researcher(s) will conduct the study according to the methods and procedures set out in the approved application.
5. Any changes that can affect the study-related risks for the research participants, particularly in terms of assurances made with regards to the protection of participants' privacy and the confidentiality of the data, should be reported to the Committee in writing.
6. The researcher will ensure that the research project adheres to any applicable national legislation, professional codes of conduct, institutional guidelines and scientific standards relevant to the specific field of study. Adherence to the following South African legislation is important, if applicable: Protection of Personal Information Act, no 4 of 2013; Children's act no 38 of 2005 and the National Health Act, no 61 of 2003.
7. Only de-identified research data may be used for secondary research purposes in future on condition that the research objectives are similar to those of the original research. Secondary use of identifiable human research data requires additional ethics clearance.
8. No field work activities may continue after the expiry date **2024/07/07**. Submission of a completed research ethics progress report will constitute an application for renewal of Ethics Research Committee approval.

Note:

The reference number **2021/07/07/62012738/09/AM** should be clearly indicated on all forms of communication with the intended research participants, as well as with the Committee.

Kind regards,



Prof AT Motlhabane
CHAIRPERSON: CEDU RERC
motlhat@unisa.ac.za



Prof PM Sebate
EXECUTIVE DEAN
Sebatpm@unisa.ac.za



University of South Africa
Preller Street, Muckleneuk Ridge, City of Tshwane
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Telephone: +27 12 429 3111 Facsimile: +27 12 429 4150
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APPENDIX B: PERMISSION TO CONDUCT A STUDY IN THE JOE GQABI DISTRICT PRIMARY SCHOOLS



JOE GQABI DISTRICT: OFFICE OF THE DISTRICT DIRECTOR
Enquiries: B Mceleli. Tel: 0 . Fax :051 6110364. Email: mceleli@yahoo.com

TO : NOMABHELU THOBI
FROM : ACTING DISTRICT DIRECTOR: JOE GQABI
DATE : 16/08/2021

SUBJECT : PERMISSION TO UNDERTAKE RESEARCH STUDIES: COUNTERING THE CHALLENGES WITH MULTI-GRADE TEACHING OF FOUNDATION PHASE TEACHERS IN THE JOE GQABI DISTRICT, EASTERN CAPE.

1. Thank for your application
2. Your application to conduct the above-mentioned research in Joe Gqabi District is hereby approved based on the following conditions.
 - (a) There will be no financial implications for the department of Education in Joe Gqabi District
 - (b) The research site and participants must not be identifiable in any way from the results of your research
 - (c) Ensure that you present a copy of this written approval letter to any research site/ institution before any research is undertaken within the district
 - (d) You will make all the arrangements concerning your research
 - (e) The research must not be conducted during official contact time, as educators' programme should not be interrupted.
 - (f) Comply with all ethical considerations especially when you are interacting with minors.
 - (g) The Department wishes you well in your research journey

ACTING DISTRICT DIRECTOR: JOE GQABI



Customer care line: 086 063 8636
Website: www.ecdoe.gov.za



APPENDIX C: PERMISSION LETTER TO DISTRICT SENIOR MANAGER

Contact No: 0783560247
Email: 62012738@mylife.unisa.ac.za

P.O BOX 622
STERKSPUIT
9762

The District Senior Manager
JOE GQABI District
P/Bag
STERKSPRUIT
9762

Dear Sir,

REQUEST FOR PERMISSION TO CONDUCT MED RESEARCH IN THE JOE GQABI DISTRICT SCHOOLS.

TITLE: COUNTERING THE CHALLENGES WITH MULTI-GRADE TEACHING OF FOUNDATION PHASE TEACHERS IN THE JOE GQABI DISTRICT, EASTERN CAPE PROVINCE

I, Nomabhelu Thobi, am studying towards a Master of Education (MEd) degree at the University of South Africa under the academic supervision of Dr N. Ndou in the Department of Leadership and Management. I hereby request your permission to conduct a research study entitled “Countering the challenges with multi-grade teaching of Foundation Phase teachers in the Joe Gqabi District, Eastern Cape Province” in five schools under your district. The study will require me to interview the school principals, Heads of Departments and Foundation Phase teachers involved in teaching multi-grade classes in selected primary schools.



The interviews will be in the form of focus groups and individual face-to-face interviews. Focus group interviews will be conducted in schools where more than three teachers teach multi-grade classes, while face-to-face interviews will take place at schools with one or two multi-grade classes. The expected duration of the interviews will be 30 minutes. Lesson observations will also be done in multi-grade classes. Overall, it will take a period of five to six weeks to collect data.

Confidentiality and anonymity will be ensured during the study. I will ensure that the data collected will be kept in a safe place upon completion of the study. Participation will be voluntary, and participants will be allowed to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

Hoping this letter finds you well.

Yours sincerely,

N. Thobi

APPENDIX D: PERMISSION LETTER TO SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

Contact No: 0783560247
Email: 62012738@mylife.unisa.ac.za

P.O BOX 622
STERKSPUIT
9762

Dear Sir/Madam,

REQUEST FOR PERMISSION TO CONDUCT AN MED RESEARCH AT YOUR SCHOOLS

TITLE: COUNTERING THE CHALLENGES WITH MULTI-GRADE TEACHING OF FOUNDATION PHASE TEACHERS IN THE JOE GQABI DISTRICT, EASTERN CAPE PROVINCE

I, Nomabhelu Thobi, am studying towards a Master of Education (MEd) degree at the University of South Africa under the academic supervision of Dr N. Ndou in the Department of Leadership and Management. I hereby request your permission to conduct a research study entitled “Countering the challenges with multi-grade teaching of Foundation Phase teachers in the Joe Gqabi District, Eastern Cape Province” in five schools under your district. The study will require me to interview the school principals, Heads of Departments and Foundation Phase teachers involved in teaching multi-grade classes in selected primary schools.

Your school has been selected because it is one of the schools with multi-grade classes; therefore, your experience in this area will be of great value. Confidentiality and anonymity during the study will be applied; I will ensure that the data collected will be kept in a safe place upon completion of the study. Participation will be voluntary, and participants will be allowed to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

I look forward to your positive response.

Yours sincerely,
N. Thobi

**APPENDIX E: INDIVIDUAL TEACHER'S CONSENT FORM TO
PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY**

**TITLE: COUNTERING THE CHALLENGES WITH MULTI-GRADE TEACHING OF
FOUNDATION PHASE TEACHERS IN THE JOE GQABI DISTRICT, EASTERN
CAPE PROVINCE**

DEAR PROSPECTIVE PARTICIPANT

My name is Nomabheli Thobi, and I am doing research towards an MEd degree under the supervision of Dr N. Ndou in the Department of Educational Management at the University of South Africa. We are hereby inviting you to participate in my research study entitled.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?

To explore strategies to alleviate challenges associated with the multi-grade classroom.

WHY AM I BEING INVITED TO PARTICIPATE?

You are invited to participate because you are affected and informed about the challenges that are encountered by the Foundation Phase teachers in multi-grade classrooms. I obtained your contact numbers from the school principal. The study will seek information from the principal, HoD, and foundation phase teachers.

WHAT IS THE NATURE OF MY PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY?

As a participant, you will be required to participate in a face-to-face semi-structured interview which will seek information about the challenges of multi-grade classes. Interviews and focus groups will be audio- and/or video recorded.

**CAN I WITHDRAW FROM THIS STUDY EVEN AFTER HAVING AGREED TO
PARTICIPATE?**

Participating in this study is voluntary and you are under no obligation to consent to participate. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a written consent form. You are free to withdraw at any time and without giving any reason.

WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

Participation in the study is voluntary. There are no specific benefits for participants. However, participants may take pride in making the study possible.

ARE THERE ANY NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES FOR ME IF I PARTICIPATE IN THE RESEARCH PROJECT?

The study will seek information relating to the school principal and teachers. The interviews will take place at a place where participants are comfortable. Names of participants will not be used in the study as anonymity has to be adhered to. The information provided by participants will not be disclosed to anyone. Where participants feel that the information sought is sensitive to answer, participants have the right to choose not to answer or to withdraw at any time.

WILL THE INFORMATION THAT I CONVEY TO THE RESEARCHER AND MY IDENTITY BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?

You have the right to insist that your name not be recorded anywhere and that no one, apart from me, (the researcher), and identified members of the research team, will know about your involvement in this research. Please note that confidentiality agreements will be sent to the research Ethics Review Committee for consideration. Otherwise, records that identify you will be available only to people working on the study, unless you give permission for other people to see the records. Your anonymous data may also be used for other purposes, such as a research report, journal articles and/or conference proceedings. A report of the study may be submitted for publication, but individual participants will not be identifiable in such report.

The study will also involve conducting focus groups. A focus group is a homogeneous group where participants are interviewed together. While I will make every effort to ensure that you will not be connected to the information that you share during the focus group, I cannot guarantee that other participants in the focus group will treat

information confidentially, I will, however, encourage all participants to also treat information with confidentiality. For this reason, I advise you to not disclose personal sensitive information from the focus group.

HOW WILL THE RESEARCHER(S) PROTECT THE SECURITY OF DATA?

I will store hardcopies of your interview for a period of five years in a locked filing cabinet at home for future research or academic purposes. Electronic information will be stored on a password-protected computer and in my personal cloud account. Future use of the stored data will be subject to further review by the Research Ethics Review Committee for approval if applicable. After a period of five years, hardcopies will be burned to ashes and electronic data will be permanently deleted.

WILL I RECEIVE PAYMENT OR ANY INCENTIVES FOR PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY?

No payments or incentives will be made available for participants. No costs will be incurred by participants as data collection will take place at a place chosen by participants, preferably in the natural research setting.

HAS THE STUDY RECEIVED APPROVAL?

This study has received written approval from the Research Ethics Review Committee of the Research Council, UNISA. A copy of the approval letter can be obtained from me if you so wish.

HOW WILL PARTICIPANTS BE INFORMED OF THE FINDINGS/RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH?

Refer them to libraries and look for any librarian assistance to show them how to search dissertation from the computer, provide details e.g. year, date, name of the institution and title or give them a disc copy, hard copy.

The researcher will send an email or SMS to all participants to request a report the findings and results after completion of interviews and observation. The researcher will inform participants to request the final research findings or should require any further information or want to contact the researcher about any aspect of this study, to contact Thobi Nomabhelu on 0783560247 or email thobinoma27@gmail.com. Should

you have concerns about the way in which the research has been conducted may contact researcher's supervisor N Ndou on 012 429 4468.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet and for participating in this study.

N. Thobi

I have read the information presented in the information letter about the study on multi-grade teaching in foundation phase classrooms.

Participant's Name (Please print) **Participant**
Signature:.....**Date:**.....

APPENDIX F: HODS' CONSENT FORM TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY

Title: Countering the challenges with multi-grade teaching of Foundation Phase teachers in the Joe Gqabi District, Eastern Cape Province

DEAR PROSPECTIVE PARTICIPANT,

My name is Nomabhelu Thobi, and I am doing research towards an MEd degree under the supervision of Dr N. Ndou in the Department of Educational Management at the University of South Africa. We are hereby inviting you to participate in my research study entitled.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?

To explore strategies to alleviate challenges associated with the multi -grade classroom.

WHY AM I BEING INVITED TO PARTICIPATE?

You are invited to participate because you are affected and informed about the challenges that are encountered by the foundation phase teachers in multi-grade classrooms. I obtained your contact numbers from the school principal. The study will seek information from the principal, HoD, and foundation phase teachers.

WHAT IS THE NATURE OF MY PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY?

As a participant, you will be required to participate in a face-to-face semi-structured interview which will seek information about the challenges of multi-grade classes. Interviews and focus groups will be audio and/or video recorded.

CAN I WITHDRAW FROM THIS STUDY EVEN AFTER HAVING AGREED TO PARTICIPATE?

Participating in this study is voluntary, and you are under no obligation to consent to participate. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a written consent form. You are free to withdraw at any time and without giving any reason.

WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

Participation in the study is voluntary. There are no specific benefits for participants. However, participants may take pride in making the study possible.

ARE THERE ANY NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES FOR ME IF I PARTICIPATE IN THE RESEARCH PROJECT?

The study will seek information relating to the school principal and teachers. The interviews will take place at a place where participants are comfortable. Names of participants will not be used in the study as anonymity has to be adhered to. The information provided by participants will not be disclosed to anyone. Where participants feel that the information sought is sensitive to answer, participants have the right to choose not to answer or to withdraw at any time.

WILL THE INFORMATION THAT I CONVEY TO THE RESEARCHER AND MY IDENTITY BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?

You have the right to insist that your name not be recorded anywhere and that no one, apart from me, (the researcher), and identified members of the research team, will know about your involvement in this research. Please note that confidentiality agreements will be sent to the research Ethics Review Committee for consideration. Otherwise, records that identify you will be available only to people working on the study, unless you give permission for other people to see the records. Your anonymous data may also be used for other purposes, such as a research report, journal articles and/or conference proceedings. A report of the study may be submitted for publication, but individual participants will not be identifiable in such a report.

The study will also involve conducting focus groups. A focus group is a homogeneous group where participants are interviewed together. While I will make every effort to ensure that you will not be connected to the information that you share during the focus group, I cannot guarantee that other participants in the focus group will treat information confidentially, I will, however, encourage all participants to also treat information with confidentiality. For this reason, I advise you to not disclose personal sensitive information from the focus group.

HOW WILL THE RESEARCHER(S) PROTECT THE SECURITY OF DATA?

I will store hardcopies of your interview for a period of five years in a locked filing cabinet at home for future research or academic purposes. Electronic information will be stored on a password-protected computer and in my personal cloud account. Future use of the stored data will be subject to further review by the Research Ethics Review Committee for approval if applicable. After a period of five years, hardcopies will be burned to ashes and electronic data will be permanently deleted.

WILL I RECEIVE PAYMENT OR ANY INCENTIVES FOR PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY?

No payments or incentives will be made available for participants. No costs will be incurred by participants as data collection will take place at a place chosen by participants, preferably in the natural research setting.

HAS THE STUDY RECEIVED APPROVAL?

This study has received written approval from the Research Ethics Review Committee of the Research Council, UNISA. A copy of the approval letter can be obtained from me if you so wish.

HOW WILL PARTICIPANTS BE INFORMED OF THE FINDINGS/RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH?

Refer them to libraries and look for any librarian assistance to show them how to search for the dissertation from a computer, provide details, e.g. year, date, name of the institution and title or give them a disc copy, hard copy.

The researcher will send an email or SMS to all participants to request a report of the findings and results after completing the interviews and observation. Furthermore, should the participants wish to contact the researcher about any aspect of this study, contact Thobi Nomabhelu on 0783560247 or email thobinoma27@gmail.com. Should they have concerns about the way in which the research was conducted, kindly contact the researcher's supervisor, Dr N. Ndou on 012 429 4468.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet and for participating in this study.

N. Thobi

I _____, have read and fully understand the request letter to participate in the research on countering the challenges with multi-grade teaching of Foundation Phase teachers in the Joe Gqabi District, Eastern Cape Province. I accept and give my consent to participate.

HoD's Name (Please print): **HoDs' Signature:**

.....

Date:

**APPENDIX G: A LETTER REQUESTING THE PRINCIPAL TO
PARTICIPATE IN AN INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW**

BOX 622
STERKSPRUIT
9762

Dear Principal

REQUEST FOR THE PRINCIPAL TO PARTICIPATE IN AN INTERVIEW

**TITLE: COUNTERING THE CHALLENGES WITH MULTI-GRADE TEACHING OF
FOUNDATION PHASE TEACHERS IN THE JOE GQABI DISTRICT, EASTERN
CAPE PROVINCE**

This letter is an invitation to you to participate in a study on countering the challenges with multi-grade teaching of Foundation Phase teachers in the Joe Gqabi District, Eastern Cape Province. I Nomabheli Thobi, I am conducting this study as part of my MEd Studies at the University of South Africa. I have purposefully identified you as a possible participant because of your valuable experience and expertise in my research topic.

I would like to provide you with more information about this study and what your involvement would entail if you should agree to take part. The study requires me to interview you together with other teachers for 30 minutes at your school as a group. In this interview, I would like to find out your views and opinions on this topic. The study also entails observing your lesson presentation. The information from both the focus group interview and lesson observation will be used to improve the quality of teaching and learning in a multi-grade context.

You may decline to answer any of the interview questions if you so wish. Furthermore, you may decide to withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequences. With your permission, the focus group discussion will be audio-recorded to facilitate the collection of accurate information, which will be later

transcribed for analysis. Shortly after the transcription has been completed, I will send you a copy of the transcript to give you an opportunity to confirm the accuracy of our conversation and to add or to clarify any points. All information provided will be considered completely confidential. Neither your name nor the name of your school will appear in any publication resulting from this study, and any identifying information will be omitted from the report. However, with your permission, anonymous quotations will be used. Data collected during this study will be retained safely in a password protected computer for five years. There are no known anticipated risks to you as a participant in this study.

I look forward to speaking with you, and thank you in advance for your assistance in this project. If you accept my invitation to participate, I will request you to sign a consent form.

I look forward to your favourable feedback.

Yours sincerely,

N. Thobi

**APPENDIX H: A LETTER REQUESTING HEADS OF DEPARTMENTS TO
PARTICIPATE IN AN INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW**

BOX 622
STERKSPRUIT
9762

Dear Head of Department,

**TITLE: COUNTERING THE CHALLENGES WITH MULTI-GRADE TEACHING OF
FOUNDATION PHASE TEACHERS IN THE JOE GQABI DISTRICT, EASTERN
CAPE PROVINCE**

This letter is an invitation to you to participate in a study on countering the challenges with multi-grade teaching of Foundation Phase teachers in the Joe Gqabi District, Eastern Cape Province. I, Nomabhelu Thobi, I am conducting this study as part of my MEd Studies at the University of South Africa under the supervision of Dr N. Ndou in the Department of Leadership and Management. I have purposefully identified you as a possible participant because of your valuable experience and expertise in my research topic.

I would like to provide you with more information about this study and what your involvement would entail if you should agree to take part. The study requires me to interview you together with other educators at your school as a group. In this interview, I would like to find out your views and opinions on this topic. The study also entails observing your lesson presentation. The information from both the focus group interview and lesson observation will be used to improve the quality of teaching and learning in a multi-grade context. The interview will take 30 minutes.

You may decline to answer any of the interview questions if you so wish. Furthermore, you may decide to withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequences. With your permission, the focus group discussion will be audio-recorded to facilitate the collection of accurate information, which will be later

transcribed for analysis. Shortly after the transcription has been completed, I will send you a copy of the transcript to give you an opportunity to confirm the accuracy of our conversation and to add or to clarify any points. All information provided will be considered completely confidential. Neither your name nor the name of your school will appear in any publication resulting from this study, and any identifying information will be omitted from the report. However, with your permission, anonymous quotations will be used. Data collected during this study will be retained safely in a password protected computer for six years. There are no known anticipated risks to you as a participant in this study.

I look forward to speaking with you, and thank you in advance for your assistance in this project. If you accept my invitation to participate, I will request you to sign a consent form.

Signature _____

Yours sincerely,

N. Thobi

APPENDIX I: CONSENT LETTER

BOX 622
STERKSPRUIT
9762

Dear Teacher,

REQUEST FOR TEACHERS TO PARTICIPATE IN AN INTERVIEW

TITLE: COUNTERING THE CHALLENGES WITH MULTI-GRADE TEACHING OF FOUNDATION PHASE TEACHERS IN THE JOE GQABI DISTRICT, EASTERN CAPE PROVINCE

This letter is an invitation to you to participate in a study on countering the challenges with multi-grade teaching of Foundation Phase teachers in the Joe Gqabi District, Eastern Cape Province. I, Nomabheli Thobi, am under the academic supervision of Dr N. Ndou in the Department of Leadership and Management. I am conducting this study as part of my MEd Studies at the University of South Africa. I have purposefully identified you as a possible participant because of your valuable experience and expertise in my research topic.

I would like to provide you with more information about this study and what your involvement would entail if you should agree to take part. The study requires me to interview you together with other teachers at your school as a group. In this interview, I would like to find out your views and opinions on this topic. The study also entails observing your lesson presentation. The information from both the focus group interview and lesson observation will be used to improve the quality of teaching and learning in a multi-grade context. Interview will take 30 minutes.

You may decline to answer any of the interview questions if you so wish. Furthermore, you may decide to withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequences. With your permission, the focus group discussion will be audio-recorded to facilitate the collection of accurate information, which will be later transcribed for analysis. Shortly after the transcription has been completed, I will send

you a copy of the transcript to give you an opportunity to confirm the accuracy of our conversation and to add or to clarify any points. All information provided will be considered completely confidential. Neither your name nor the name of your school will appear in any publication resulting from this study and any identifying information will be omitted from the report. However, with your permission, anonymous quotations will be used. Data collected during this study will be retained safely in a password protected computer for five years. There are no known anticipated risks to you as a participant in this study.

I look forward to speaking with you, and thank you in advance for your assistance in this project. If you accept my invitation to participate, I will request you to sign a consent form.

Signature _____

I look forward to your favourable feedback.

Yours sincerely,

N. Thobi

APPENDIX J: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR PRINCIPALS

1. What led to the introduction of multi-grade classes in your school?
2. Did you report the matter to the Department of Education? If yes, what was their response?
3. Do you have anyone in the school to help you with curriculum management?
4. Do you get any support in the form of workshops from the Department of Education?
5. What strategies do you take to ensure that the curriculum is being implemented in multi-grade classes?
6. How is the performance of learners studying in a multi-grade class?
7. What challenges do you encounter with multi-grade teaching setting as the principal?
8. In your opinion, what strategies have been implemented to ensure effective teaching and learning in multi-grade classes

APPENDIX K: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR HODs

1. What is your understanding of the concept of multi-grade teaching?
2. What led to the introduction of multi-grade classes in your school?
3. Do you receive any support from other educational stakeholders in curriculum management?
4. Are there any training sessions to support teachers involved in multi-grade classes?
5. What strategies do you use to ensure that the curriculum is being implemented in multi-grade classes?
6. How is the performance of learners studying in a multi-grade class?
7. As the HoD, what challenges do you encounter in managing Foundation Phase teachers in multi-grade classrooms?
8. In your opinion, what strategies could be implemented to ensure effective teaching and learning in multi-grade classes?

**APPENDIX L: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR FOUNDATION PHASE
TEACHERS**

1. What is your understanding of the concept of multi-grade teaching?
2. Why did your school introduce multi-grade teaching?
3. Can you briefly explain how you group your learners in the classrooms?
4. How do you plan your lessons?
5. How do you manage learners to ensure discipline in your classroom?
6. How do you manage time and accommodate all learners in the same classroom?
7. Do you receive any extra support from the Department of Education?
8. How effective is multi-grade teaching for learners' education?
9. How do you feel about multi-grade teaching?
10. In your opinion, what should be done to ensure effective teaching and learning in your class?

APPENDIX M: LESSON OBSERVATION

School:

Grades combined:

Subject:

Duration of lesson:

Number of teachers:

Number of learners:

Number of classrooms:

1. CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

1.1 Number of learners per grade:

1.1 Sitting space:

1.2 Resources used:

1.3 Type of textbook/material used:

2. CLASSROOM INTERACTION

2.1 What is the nature of the teacher and learner interaction?

2.2 Is the teacher able to involve learners in both grades in the lesson?

2.3 How is learner discipline maintained in the classroom?

2.4 Which teaching method(s) does the teacher use?

2.5 Does the teacher teach according to the lesson plan?

2.6 How is learner behaviour maintained in the classroom?

APPENDIX N: FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is your understanding of the concept of multi-grade teaching?
2. What causes multi-grade teaching?
3. Why was multi-grade teaching introduced in your school?
4. Which teaching methods do you use in the multi-grade classroom?
5. Which teaching material do you use in your classroom?
6. What challenges do you experience when assessing learners?
7. Do you receive any support or training from the Department of Education?
8. How do you feel about multi-grade teaching?
9. In your opinion, what should be done to ensure the effectiveness of teaching and learning in multi-grade classes?

APPENDIX O: PROOF OF EDITING

NIM Editorial
Midrand, Gauteng, 1685
Cell: +27 82 587 4489
Email: info@nimeditorial.co.za
www.nimeditorial.co.za

Reg No. 2016/0855907



12 August 2022

Editorial Certificate

To Whom It May Concern,

This letter certifies that the dissertation entitled; **COUNTERING THE CHALLENGES WITH MULTI-GRADE TEACHING OF FOUNDATION PHASE TEACHERS IN THE JOE GQABI DISTRICT, EASTERN CAPE PROVINCE** by **NOMABHELU THOBI**, was proofread for language, grammar, punctuation, spelling, and overall style by NIM Editorial.

Signed on behalf of NIM Editorial by:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'N.I. Mabidi', written over a horizontal line.

.....
Dr N.I Mabidi
Founder & Chief Editor