Challenges encountered by teaching principals in rural multigrade primary schools: A

South African perspective

Matshidiso Taole

University of South Africa,

Department of Curriculum and Instructional Studies

Abstract

This study reports on the challenges facing multigrade principals. Principals are regarded as curriculum leaders and have critical roles to play in the success of the school. However, school principals experience a myriad of complex challenges in the execution of their roles and responsibilities. The purpose of this qualitative study was to outline the findings from a small-scale, exploratory study. Five multigrade school principals participated in the analysis. Using an interpretative qualitative research approach, a multiple case study of five multigrade teaching principals was employed. Four or more years of teaching and leadership experience in multigrade schools were used as the criteria for inclusion in the study. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data and thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. The findings showed that multigrade principals have workload issues and lack of professional development in leadership in multigrade contexts as some of the challenges facing them. In addition, participants cited managing the interface between work and home as another worrisome issue in their roles as principals. This study recommends that multigrade principals need to be capacitated so that they have the necessary competencies and skills to function effectively in their multigrade context. To enhance effective practices and policies in rural multigrade schools, policymakers need to comprehend the unique challenges that multigrade teaching principals face and radically rethink the principals' preparation programs to include multigrade teaching principals.

Keywords: Challenges, Interface, Multigrade, Professional development, Principals, Roles and responsibilities

Introduction

Principals play a crucial role in creating a conducive learning and working environment for both teachers and learners and encouraging academic excellence in the school (Hitt & Tucker, 2016; Naidoo, 2019; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012). Principals are regarded as curriculum leaders, and agents of transformation and have a critical role to play in the success of the school (Onderi & Makori, 2013). Kowalski (2010) asserts that the principal's primary roles are that of a manager, leader, and administrator. As the manager, the principal's primary responsibility is to manage human, physical, and financial resources. As a leader, the principal focuses on the vision and the general effectiveness of the school. As an administrator, the main focus is on the day-to-day activities of the school. Literature has attempted to describe the varying and diverse roles of the principal as indicated above. However, school leadership is a dynamic terrain that is constantly changing due to the changing demand and school reforms (Wise, 2015).

Nevertheless, the literature is not entirely clear on identifying the core characteristics of leadership that could ensure that the school is more effective and thus enhance the educational outcomes (Naidoo & Peterson, 2015). On a global scale, school leadership in the 21st century is confronted with various demands and challenges (Mestry, 2017; Mestry & Grobler, 2004; Onderi & Makori, 2013) with principals' roles and responsibilities being multi-faceted, demanding, and challenging, complicated, overloaded and unclear (Bush, 2013; Mestry, 2017). Literature indicates that school principals are facing considerable challenges in the execution of their roles and responsibilities (Bush, 2013; Mestry, 2017; Onderi & Makori, 2013). According to research, the principal plays a critical role in ensuring the academic achievement of students and the school's overall results. (Naidoo, 2019). Principals in multigrade schools are no exceptions.

Therefore, to avoid putting principals in a serious predicament, it is imperative to ensure that principals are skilled and competent to realize the vision and mission of the educational institution.

Multigrade schools are commonly found in underprivileged communities in South Africa, such as villages and townships. According to the Department of Basic Education's National Annual Report Survey (DBE, 2015), there are roughly 5153 multigrade schools in the country, dispersed across all nine provinces. In most situations, learner enrolment is smaller than in urban schools, resulting in fewer teachers being qualified, and one teacher teaching two or more grades. Poverty and underdevelopment are two characteristics of multigrade education (DBE, 2015). According to the DBE (2015), multigrade schools are a close reflection of the inequities and socioeconomic issues that are present in South Africa as a whole. The majority of teachers who are assigned to multigrade classes assume that their condition is temporary. As a result, they do not commit to teaching multigrade classes, nor do they learn how to do it effectively. However, the truth is that these classes are likely to persist for a long time. Even though multigrade teaching is common in South African schools, teachers are not prepared for it during their basic teacher education.

Star and White (2008) argue that challenges confronting rural multigrade principals include inter alia, workload proliferation, educational equity issues, the re-defined principalship, escalating role multiplicity, and school survival. They argue that these challenges manifest differently depending on the school context and have an impact on the lived experiences of principals in small schools. A body of research has focused on principalship in rural contexts (e.g., Msila, 2010; Preston & Barnes, 2017; Salazor, 2007); from varying perspectives. For example, Msila (2012) focused on leadership in rural schools and recommended that rural

principals need to take initiatives to minimize the challenges they face to facilitate the schools successfully. Preston and Barnes (2017) investigated 40 research studies on successful leadership in rural schools. They found that successful rural principals promote people-centered leadership and involvement of all stakeholders, creating leaders that are change agents. Others, such as Salazor (2007) investigated the professional development needs of rural principals. Salazor (2007) argued that formal leadership in schools is a complex, multi-faceted task that has evolved over the last decade in response to the demands of educational reform and renewal. However, there seems to be a paucity of literature on the challenges principals face in small schools (Murdoch, 2009; Newton & Wallin, 2013), especially in multigrade schools. Murdoch (2009) suggests that the lack of interest in principals' teaching multigrade schools in Australia is due to these schools being perceived as 'scaled down' versions of a full-time primary principalship. Murdoch (2009) argues that although rural principals have dual roles in school management and classroom teaching, the recognition of the unique challenges they are facing is limited.

The purpose of this study is to report and discuss the findings of an exploratory study designed to shed light on how multigrade principals in rural schools situated in South Africa perceive their challenges both professionally and personally. The study addressed the following question: *What are the challenges encountered by principals in rural multigrade schools?* This study focuses on five principals in rural multigrade primary schools in the Limpopo province of South Africa who face context-specific challenges in addition to those commonly experienced in schools. This study will add to the existing body of research on leadership in rural schools. To set the scene for this research a brief overview of literature about multigrade schools, the context of rural schools, and the roles, challenges, and training needed to take on the role of leadership in rural schools is discussed.

Literature review

Multigrade schools

Multigrade schools in South Africa are found in remote rural areas (DBE, 2015) and are a phenomenon found in both developing and developed countries (Kivunja & Sims, 2015; Lapuz, 2015). The multigrade education system is used by the government to ensure access to quality education for all school-age children in remote communities where enrolment does not warrant the organization of mono-grade classes. The multigrade classes are often created out of necessity (Cornish, 2010) and, because of financial constraints, non-availability of teachers, or lack of resources (Lapuz, 2015).

The concept of multigrade, small schools, and rural schools do not enjoy a common interpretation among researchers. Multigrade implies various things to various individuals and the meaning frequently relies upon the setting of the discussion and the speaker's perspective. Some authors refer to these schools as small schools and rural schools (Newton & Wallin, 2013). In this paper, small schools and rural schools are referred to as multigrade schools often found in deprived or impoverished communities with one teacher being responsible for teaching more than one grade with limited resources (Joubert, 2010). Multigrade-teaching has been hailed by researchers as a challenging pedagogy with challenges such as teaching more than one grade and meeting the diverse needs of learners (Hyry-Beihammer & Hascher, 2015; Naparan & Alinsung, 2021), as well as the ill-preparedness of teachers for the realities that they face in those teaching contexts (Brown, 2010; Taole, 2014).

There are differences in the rationale that underpins the introduction of multigrade teaching classes. For developed countries such as Ireland, Australia, and Canada, multigrade teaching was introduced by a deliberate choice of a multigrade system based on specific

attributes rather than learner number or learner-teacher ratios (Kivunja & Sims, 2015). Lopuz (2015) contends that multigrade schools exist due to the necessity imposed by economic and geographical conditions such as the ones found in the mountainous areas of the Philippines.

Multigrade teaching in South Africa

According to the Department of Basic Education's National Annual Report Survey (DBE, 2015), there are roughly 5153 multigrade schools in the country, spread across all nine provinces. Multigrade teaching was implemented in South Africa to provide access to high-quality education, maximize scarce resources, foster the spirit of ubuntu, address teacher absenteeism, mitigate a chronic teacher shortage, and address both the lack of infrastructure and the problem of long distances to schools (DBE, 2015).

The majority of multigrade teachers' attitudes toward multigrade classes are negative, according to the literature (Brown, 2010; Cornish, 2014). Inappropriate training, under-resourcing of schools, teachers' inability to adapt the curriculum to meet the needs of their learners, the high level of planning required before lesson presentation, insufficient knowledge of available teaching methods, lack of support, and classes with low learner enrolment and/or overcrowded classrooms are some of the challenges identified by the DBE (2015).

Rural schools' context and principalship

The concept 'rural' is fluid as determinants and characteristics of rurality are constantly changing (Miller, 2015). Differing perspectives on what makes a small school and what defines rurality ensure that defining these terms is somewhat contentious. Msila (2010) posits that defining the term rural is problematic and can be tricky depending on different countries. Some authors use the terms small school, farm school, and rural schools interchangeably. In the Australian context, a small school is defined as one with at most 100 students (Wildy & Clarke,

2012). However, determinant characteristics of rural areas are the distance from the cities,

isolation, community size, and /or economic activities (Miller, 2015; Pizzoli & Gong, 2007).

Rural areas are remote and relatively underdeveloped and lack many amenities such as sanitation

facilities, water, and tared road (Du Plessis, 2014). These conditions are the results of the

interplay of economic, demographic, and geographic characteristics of communities where these

schools are situated. For some countries, rural is related to economic activities such as farming

and agriculture and whether services such as schools and hospitals are available in the area

(Pizzoli & Gong, 2007) while Miller (2015) defines rural as the geographical areas that are not

urban. In the South African context, rural education is defined by the DBE (2015) as "the

provision of quality education in schools in areas with tribal authorities, farming communities,

and densely populated settlements outside of urban areas" (p.1). South Africa has several rural

schools situated in various provinces around the country. Rural education forms a large part of

South Africa's education system. However, it has been acknowledged that not much has been

achieved in ensuring that problems such as poor infrastructure, inadequate resources, and a

shortage of qualified teachers are addressed in rural schools (DBE, 2015). At the center of rural

education is the principal whose roles and responsibilities are dynamic as transformation is

continuously evolving in the education space. DBE (2014) emphasizes that the core purpose of

principalship is "to provide leadership and management in all areas of the school to enable the

creation and support of the conditions under which high-quality teaching and learning takes

place, which promotes the highest possible standards of learner achievements" (p.12). In the

South African education context, many school principals do not have the necessary skills and

competencies needed to lead and manage schools (Naidoo, 2019).

Rural schools in South Africa are beset by challenges such as lack of parental interest in children's education, insufficient funding from the state, underqualified teachers, and multigrade teaching (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019)**,** a lack of resources both human and physical Msila (2010) and geographic isolation (Joubert, 2010). It should be mentioned that the quality of rural education, remains a social and human justice issue. Learners in poor communities have the right to quality education and dignity. Therefore, social justice and human rights should not be foregone in the quest for quality education in rural areas.

Challenges of rural teaching principals

In the context of rapid education reform, the role of the principal is undeniably more intricate than before as the principal assumes numerous fundamental roles within the school. Many challenges are unique to the rurality of the school (Du Plessis, 2017). The challenges include the struggle with fulfilling their full-time administrative duties while carrying heavy teaching loads, sometimes across multigrade (Clarke et al., 2006; Starr & White, 2009; Taole, 2014). In addition, the principal in multigrade schools finds himself/herself teaching different grades at the same time, which is a challenge as well as being the sole leader without the assistance of the deputy principal or head of the department. These principals have to juggle their administrative duties and their teaching duties in many classrooms. Furthermore, these principals are also responsible for ensuring that their schools are effective and functional. The literature review conducted by Preston et al. (2013) on rural principals, showed that challenges that rural principals faces include lack of professional development, lack of resources, dual roles, gender roles, and school accountability and change. Roberts and Downs (2019) contend that the challenges rural school leaders experience relate to understanding and adapting to the rural context and workload pressures. Research conducted by Cornish and Jenkins (2015) on

Australian rural principals showed that professional and social isolation are some of the challenges experienced by rural schools' principals. However, they argue that isolation can be viewed positively as giving principals the chance to think about their challenges and ways of overcoming them as well as an opportunity to think of innovative ways to support learners.

Since multigrade principals are expected to teach multigrade classes, one other challenge identified by literature is that principals often encounter problems in teaching outside their area of expertise (Jenkins & Reitano, 2015; Wildy & Clarke, 2012). Principals in small rural schools spend a greater percentage of their time teaching cross-grade, multigrade groups of students than their peers in urban schools. However, requirements from the Department of Education are the same, irrespective of the location or learner enrolment. Principals of larger schools can delegate and share management responsibilities, but their small rural counterparts do not have this privilege. Literature suggested that areas that could lead to successful leadership in rural schools are understanding the rural context, adequate preparation and support for their envisaged roles and responsibilities and fostering a healthy relationship with community embers (Roberts & Downs, 2019).

Training of principals

Research has indicated that leadership is imperative for the success of a school and the overall well-being of learners, (Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012). Principals are regarded as school managers, the most important partners in education, and key delivery agents in the education system (DBE, 2019). The (DBE, 2019) has identified eight core purposes of the principal in the South African context and these include leading teaching and learning, shaping the direction and development of the school, managing quality and securing accountability, ensuring self and others' empowerment, managing school in general, working with and for the

community, managing human resources and advocating extra-mural activities. Emanating from the huge responsibilities that are placed on principals, principals need to be competent in executing their duties in due diligence. A study conducted by Mestry and Bodalina (2015) involving 15 principals in South African schools, revealed that there is no formal training program to prepare principals for the leadership roles that they are expected to play. Naidoo (2019) emphasized that "presently preparation for principals or a certification program in South Africa is lacking" (p.2). As a result, principals are operating on a trial-and-error basis. As Bush (2008) mentioned, school principals work without the necessary skills that will ensure that they perform to their maximum potential.

In South Africa generally, school principals are not expected to have a specific leadership qualification when they assume the position (Schleicher, 2012). Therefore, continuous professional development remains the tool that will ensure that principals are prepared for the tasks that they need to perform, However, studies have shown that more often than not, even university programs do not prepare them for the roles that they will have to play at school level as such they leave the universities and colleges unprepared (Mendels & Mitgang, 2013; Tingle et al., (2017). Schleicher (2012) argues that in-service training and professional networks can be used to respond to the specific needs of principals, upskill them and provide opportunities for them to share ideas. In addition, rural principals need to comprehend what is expected of them as leaders in a rural school (Wildy et al., 2014), understand the issues that school communities face, and be equipped to deal with the challenges.

Methodology

The methodological approach taken in this study is an exploratory, qualitative research approach employing multiple case studies. According to Punch and Oancea (2014), a multi-case study is another kind of instrumental case that is done in such a way that it covers several cases in a single study to gain more insights into the phenomenon. This approach was appropriate for providing an in-depth description of the challenges of teaching principals in multigrade schools (Merriam, 1998). The case study in this research comprised five multigrade teaching principals, through description and interpretation, aimed at producing a detailed view of their leadership by providing explanatory data from their experiences.

Research site

The study was conducted in purposefully selected multigrade schools situated in rural areas in one of the nine provinces in South Africa. Rural areas are generally remote and relatively under-developed (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). Enrolments in these schools ranged from 20-and 70 learners, staffed by four full-time teachers with no support staff which means that principals must take responsibility for the administrative duties without the assistance of the support staff. Learners in these schools are usually from poor family backgrounds. These schools are classified as quintile one and are regarded as "No Fee' schools which mean parents do not pay school fees. The South African Schools Act of 1996 (RSA, 1996) allows for learners from poor families to be exempt from paying school fees. The No-Fee policy ranks schools according to the level of poverty in the surrounding area. In quintile 1 or 2 schools, learners are provided with food through a feeding scheme (officially referred to as National School Nutrition Programme) established by the South African government in 1994 (DoE, 1994). As many of the learners come to school on an empty stomach and often return to school with limited or no food

to eat, the program aims at enhancing children's active learning capacity by alleviating short-term

hunger, providing an incentive for children to attend school, regularly and punctually and

addressing certain micro-nutrient deficiencies (DoE, 1994.)

Sampling

Five multigrade schools from the Sibasa circuit in the Vhembe district in Limpopo

province were purposely selected for the study. Sibasa circuit has 14 multigrade schools and all

principals in these schools were invited to participate in the study via email. Only 8 individuals

responded and agreed to participate in the study. However, three of the participants withdrew

from the study citing personal reasons. Therefore, only five multigrade principals participated in

the study. The criteria used for choosing schools was that the schools are multigrade schools

situated in rural areas. Upon choosing the schools, the researcher visited each school and met

with the principal to discuss the purpose of the study and their possible participation in the study.

Dates and times for the interviews were discussed with the participants to ensure

that they were not inconvenienced by the researcher. The researcher sought permission to

conduct research from the Sibasa district office and obtained consent from the participants.

Consent was obtained from the participants to use an audio recorder during the interview. They

were told that signing the permission form did not obligate them to continue with the study and

that they might withdraw at any moment. All attempts were made to ensure that participants'

identity was protected. In their positions as principals of multigrade schools, they are inherently

vulnerable therefore, any information that may lead to their identity being exposed was deleted

from the data set, and pseudonyms were assigned to each participant.

Participants

The 5 principals from the school that agreed to participate consisted of two males and 3 females. The pseudonyms Dipuo, Harry, Flora, Mapula, and Mike were used to ensure the participants' confidentiality. The criteria for inclusion in the sample were a relevant teaching qualification, number of years of experience as a principal in a multigrade school, the type of school that is, multigrade school, as well as availability, and willingness to participate in the study. All participants, as teaching principals, have taught for 5-6 years and were all teaching more than two grades: for example, Grades 3 and 4 and Grades 5 and 6 and teaching more than three subjects in each grade.

Data collection

One-to-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with five multigrade teaching principals. Interviews were conducted after school, that is between 14h30 and 16h00. Three participants chose to be interviewed at their school and two preferred to be interviewed at home. An interview guide was used to explore the challenges that multigrade principals face and probe their feelings, thoughts, and concerns relating to their leadership roles and teaching in multigrade schools. The interview guide consists of questions such as:

a.   What are the challenges that you experienced as a principal in a multigrade school?

b.   How do you understand your leadership roles and teaching in multigrade schools?

c.   How long have you been a principal in a multigrade school?

During the interview, probing questions were used to allow participants to elaborate on their challenges (Creswell, 2014). Probing facilitated dialogue and allowed the researcher to build

rapport with the participants (Creswell, 2014). Their narratives provided a helpful perspective on their challenges and experiences.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns and themes emerging from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher used Guba and Lincoln's (1985, as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) trustworthiness construct to ensure quality and rigor. The interview transcripts were sent to the participants for member checking. The participants were asked to ensure that the transcripts accurately reflected their real statements. The data were read several times to ensure familiarity and relevant information that relates to the research question was identified. The re-reading procedure aided in the classification and reduction of data into themes for reporting purposes. The initial codes were then produced, which were later developed into categories. The coded data is examined and analyzed to see how different codes might be merged to produce themes or sub-themes based on shared meanings. This entails combining many codes that share a common underlying notion or data aspect into a single code. Themes that would provide evidence of rural principals' challenges in rural multigrade schools were then developed.

Research Findings

Reporting of the research findings begins with a table presenting a description of the participants.

Table 1. *Summary descriptions of multigrade teaching principals*

Teaching principals	No of years as principals	No of years as principals in multigrade schools	Number of students in the school	Grades in the school
Mike	9	6	70	1-7
Dipuo	7	5	54	1-7
Harry	9	5	81	1-7
Mapula	7	5	49	1-7
Flora	8	7	61	1--7

Four themes emerged from the data analysis, namely: lack of formal training for leadership in multigrade schools, workload, and managing the interface between work and home.

Lack of formal training for leadership in multigrade schools

Although the teaching principals play a critical role in their school context, most of them felt that they are not trained for the roles that they need to perform in their multigrade schools' context. They indicated that they had the experience of being a principal in a mainstream school but they did not have training for being a principal in a multigrade school. Despite several years of being a principal, they felt that they were not prepared and felt that they need to be formally trained as there are different aspects to attend to. On this issue, principals said;

I was a principal before I came to this school, but it is not the same, Here I have few teachers and the subjects are the same as in other schools. I need to be trained on how to handle this situation. Although I came here six years ago, it is still difficult to manage. (Mike)

Training offered by the Department is for principals in general and I still think our schools are unique and should be treated as such. I feel that we are isolated from the rest of the principals because we do not get a special attention that we deserve. (Flora)

The only thing that I can say on that issue is that we are not given tools to deal with multigrade schools, we are not trained and it's like we are on our own. Yes, we do not have 'tools for trade'. (Harry)

Participants felt that they are ill-equipped to perform the duties expected of them. Not having 'tools for trade' sabotages the work that they need to do and could render them ineffective. In addition, participants acknowledge that their schools are unique and therefore, they have distinctive challenges. They further mention that they feel alienated from their peers. Isolation deprives them of the opportunity to engage and share good practices and experiences.

Workload

Supporting teachers in their teaching endeavours is one of the principal's core duties; however, participants in this study mentioned that they do not have time to support their teachers as they are involved in multiple roles. Although they acknowledged that supporting teachers was crucial in ensuring that the mission and vision of the school were accomplished, their multigrade context is a hindrance. This engenders feelings of pressure, lack of time, and general 'busyness'. Here are some of their comments:

To be honest, I do not have time to do that, I would like to and I know that classroom supervision and monitoring are things that I must do. I am always working under pressure. But teachers understand the dilemma that I am facing. (Mapula)

I don't do that; I feel I also need to be supported. There is pressure left right and center (Dipuo)

I feel guilty that I do not have time to support my teachers, but they also understand that with the amount of work that I need to do, I can't. They just have to do things on their own, but luckily,

they understand my situation. It's bad, but what can I do? I am always busy; I do not have time to do that. (Flora)

The interviewed principals indicated that they provided minimal support to the staff members because they did not have time to do monitoring and classroom supervision as they are engaged in both teaching their classes and their administrative duties. They indicated that they were aware that they were failing in their duties as school managers but there is little that they can do as teaching needs to be prioritized. Participants mentioned that teachers understand their 'dilemma 'and do not feel that they are not supported. One participant mentioned that:

To be honest, I feel frustrated as I find it difficult to do both jobs, when I focus on teaching, administrative work is suffering, and it's really difficult. I also feel guilty when I am not attending to my learners, it's like I am neglecting them. I seriously don't know what to do. (Dipuo)

Although they acknowledged the challenges associated with their work, these principals felt that their learners come first and that teaching and learning is the prime task. Principals acknowledged that they complete their administrative work after school hours so that their full attention is given to their learners. This shows a sense of responsibility and commitment on the part of the school principals; however, they had to deal with the everlasting and continuing struggle in juggling the two roles that were both demanding and for which they are accountable.

One of the participants mentioned that in some instances, he was left with no choice but to do administrative tasks in the classroom. He indicated that he gave learners activities to keep them busy while he attended to his administrative duties. Mapula reported *"Sometimes I have to deal with pressing issues from the Department in the classroom, I do not have a choice. I give my learners work to do while I attend to the submissions that are needed urgently by the Department"*.

Managing the interface between work and home

Although the participants viewed their work positively, their main concern was striking a balance between work and family time. The study revealed that multigrade principals were

overwhelmed by the challenge of having to balance their teaching roles and their administrative duties. All participants indicated that their family time was compromised as they found themselves working after hours and even on weekends to keep up with the demands of their administrative duties and prepare for their multigrade classes. Participants mentioned that:

> *I do not have time for my family, when I get home, I am tired and sometimes will fall asleep* on *the sofa due to tiredness. Even on weekends, I am working, I do not have time to relax with my family. When I get home, I must do my administrative work and also prepare for my next class.* (Dipuo)

> *Because I am working on the weekends, ensuring that my administrative work is on course and my lessons are prepared for my multigrade classes, I cannot even attend family gatherings or funerals over the weekends as I am always busy. (Harry).*

The above quotes showed that the high workload causes exhaustion for some participants with them working over the weekends to complete both administrative and instructional tasks. This could evoke stress and feelings of neglecting social and family responsibilities.

Discussion of findings

The results of the study showed that due to heavy workload, principals in multigrade schools do not support their teachers as they are expected to. This creates a situation where teachers are not monitored, and this could impact the efficiency and competence of teachers and the school in general. Arguably leadership in multigrade schools should be better distributed to allow other teachers to assume some of the school principals' tasks, especially in a multigrade context. This will allow the principal some space to deal with other matters that are pertinent in his/her role. The principal must support multigrade teachers in sharpening the pedagogical practices used in multigrade classrooms. As leaders, they should take an interest in and support their teachers. (Kimball, 2011). Msila and Mtshali (2011) maintained that true leaders support and develop teachers in their schools. This means that

principals need to be well trained for this role although some literature suggests that principals

are not trained for their leadership positions (Mestry, 2017; Msila, 2010).

The results of the study show that managing the interface between work and home has

emerged as a central issue for participants. They battle to maintain a healthy balance between

their administrative/teaching roles and their roles. People need to be productive at work and

engage meaningfully in their homes and communities. The results showed that often, participants

do their administrative and teaching preparation at home. The findings corroborate the study by

Wallin and Newton (2014) with twelve rural principals in Manitoba and Alberta rural teaching

principals, which suggest that principals have "administrative and teaching preparation duties

that consume their time, affecting their family and home life" (p.63). Newton and Wallin (2013)

further argued that more often than not principals' administrative work fell outside of the school

day. They further emphasized that principals often put school commitments first at the expense

of their family time. Participants indicated that when they get home, they are tired. According to

Cornish and Jenkins (2015), the high workload and the challenges of rural school leadership

cause exhaustion, stress and health issues. This could compromise the quality of work that they

do and impact the overall functioning of the school and their personal lives.

Furthermore, the current study found that lack of professional development opportunities

is a serious concern among participants. Participants do not feel supported by the Department of

Education and felt alienated from development and support. This finding is in line with research

conducted by scholars such as Msila (2012) and Lock et al. (2012) that found that rural

principals do not have opportunities to share good practices and concerns with their peers which

often results in isolation from social and professional networks. These sentiments are shared by

Star and White (2008) that there is generally a lack of professional support for rural principals.

Lock *et al.* (2012); Salazar's (2007) and Hildreth et al.'s (2018) research showed that rural principals require unique training and leadership development that relates to their rural circumstances. Principals' professional development should be ongoing to equip them with the necessary skills to function effectively in their context.

Conclusion

The study explored the challenges facing multigrade principals through the voices of five principals who were selected purposely. This study showed that multigrade principals faced challenges such as workload and lack of professional development in leadership in multigrade contexts as some of the challenges facing them. In addition, participants cited managing the interface between work and home as another worrisome issue in their role as principals. The findings of this study have implications for teaching principals in multigrade schools. Although small-scale research was conducted, with data drawn from schools in Limpopo province, the results could be applicable in a similar context. Furthermore, policymakers must appreciate the challenges posed by multigrade teaching pedagogy and fundamentally rethink principals' training programs to include multigrade teaching principals to improve innovative strategies and policies in rural multigrade schools.

References

Brown, B. A. (2010). Teachers' accounts of the usefulness of multigrade teaching in promoting sustainable human-development-related outcomes in rural South Africa. *Journal of Southern African Studies,*36(1), 189-207. https://doi.org/10.1080/03057071003607428

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3 (2), 77-101.

Bush, T. (2008). *Leadership and management development in education*. Sage. http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781446213605

Bush, T. (2013). Leadership development for school principals: Specialized preparation or post-hoc repair. *Educational Management Administration and Leadership,* 41(3), 253-255. https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143213477065

Clarke, S., Stevens, E., & Wildy, H. (2006). Rural rides in Queensland: Travels with novice teaching principals. *International Journal of Leadership in Education, 9*(1),75-88. http://doi.org/10.1080/13603120500471958

Cornish, L. (2014). Parents' perceptions of social-emotional issues in composite classes. *TalentEd*, *28*(1/2), 13-23.

Cornish, L. (2010). Multiage classes-What's in a name? *Journal of Multiage Education,* 4(2), 7–10.

Cornish, L., & Jenkins, K. (2015). Teaching principals: The 'I's Have It! In Graham, L. & Miller, J. (Eds.), *Bush Tracks: The Opportunities and Challenges of Rural Teaching and Leadership* (pp 135-156). Sense Publishers.

Creswell, J.W (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed). Sage.

Denzin, N.K., & Lincoln, Y.S.(2000). *Handbook of qualitative research(2nd ed)*. Thousand Oaks, Sage.

Department of Basic Education (DBE). (2014). *Department of Basic Education the South African Standard for Principalship*. Government Printers.

Department of Basic Education (DBE). (2015). *Rural schooling / multigrade schools/ farms schools/non-viable schools; Inclusive Education implementation; Special Needs schools: Department briefing.* Government Printers.

Department of Basic Education (DBE). (2019). *Importance of principals.* Government Printers.

Department of Education (DoE). (1994). *National School Nutrition Programme*. Government Printers.

Du Plessis, P. (2017). Challenges for rural school leaders in a developing context: A case study on leadership practices of effective rural principals. *Koers*, *82(3), 1-10.* http://dx.doi.org/10.19108/koers.82.3.2337

Du Plessis, P. (2014). Problems and complexities in rural schools: Challenges of education and social development. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences,*5(20), 1109-1123. http:// doi:10.5901/mjss.2014.v5n20p1109

Du Plessis, P., & Mestry, R. (2019). Teachers for rural schools–a challenge for South Africa. *South African Journal of Education,* 39,51-59. http://doi:10.15700/saje.v39ns1a1774

Hildreth, D., R., R.H., & Crouse, T. (2018). Ready, Set, Grow! Preparing and equipping the rural school leader for success. *Alabama Journal of Educational Leadership,*5, 39-52.

Hitt, D.H., & Tucker, P.D. (2016). Systematic review of key leader practices found to influence student achievement: A unified framework. *Review of Educational Research,* 86(2),531-569. https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654315614911

Hyry-Beihammer, E. K., & Hascher, T. (2015). Multigrade teaching in primary education as a promising pedagogy for teacher education in Austria and Finland. *International Teacher Education: Promising Pedagogies (Part C)*. Emerald Group Publishing Limited.

Jenkins, K., & Reitano, P. (2015). Teaching principals' stories. In Graham, L. & Miller, J. (Eds.), *Bush*

Tracks: The Opportunities and Challenges of Rural Teaching and Leadership (pp 119-133). Sense Publishers.

Joubert, J. (2010). Multigrade teaching in South Africa. *Commonwealth Education Online*. Retrieved from https://www.cedol.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/58-62-2010.pdf.

Kimball, S. M. (2011). Principals: Human capital managers at every school. *Phi Delta Kappan,* 92 (7), 13-18. https://doi.org/10.1177/003172171109200704

Kivunja, C., & Sims, M. (2015). Perceptions of multigrade teaching: A narrative inquiry into the voices of stakeholders in multigrade contexts in rural Zambia. *Higher Education Studies,*5(2), 10-20. https://doi.10.5539/hes.v5n2p10

Kowalski, T.J. (2010). *The school principal: Visionary leadership and competent management*. Routledge.

Lapuz, M. C. (2015). Delights and difficulties multigrade teachers inrural schools. *International Journal of Engineering and Technical Research,*3(7), 144-151.

Lock, G., Budgen, F., Lunay, R., & Oakley, G. (2012). Welcome to the outback: the paradoxes of living and teaching in remote Western Australian schools. *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, *22*(3), 117-134.

Mendels, P., & Mitgang, L.D. (2013). Creating strong principals.*Educational leadership,*70(7), 22-29.

Merriam, S.B.(1998). *Qualitative Research and Case Study Applications in Education: Revised and Expanded from Case Study Research in Education.* Jossey-Bass Publishers

Mestry, R. (2017). Empowering principals to lead and manage public schools effectively in the 21st century. *South African Journal of Education,*37, 1, 1-11. https://doi:10.15700/saje.v37n1a1334

Mestry, R., & Bodalina, K. (2015). The perceptions and experiences of school management teams and teachers of the management of physical resources in public schools. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership,* 43(3), 433-451. http://doi:10.1177/1741143214549972

Mestry, R., & Grobler, B.R. (2004). The training and development of principals to manage schools effectively using the competence approach. *International Studies in Educational Administration,*32(3), 2–19. Retrieved from https://hdl.handle.net/10520/EJC31664

Miller, P. (2015). Leading Remotely: Exploring the experiences of principals in

    rural and remote school communities in Jamaica. *International Journal of Whole Schooling*,11, 1,

    35-53.

Msila, V. (2010). Rural school principals' quest for effectiveness: Lessons from the field. *Journal of*

    *Education,*48(1), 169-189.

Msila, V. (2012). Fostering an effective school through moral leadership: A South African case study.

    *International Journal of Social Sciences and Education,*2(1), 174-192.

Msila, V. (2012). Rural school principals' quest for effectiveness: Lessons from the field. *Journal of*

    *Education,*48(1), 169-189.

Msila, V., & Mtshali, J. (2011). Professional development of principals: A recipe for future schools?

    Journal of Education, Society and Behavioural Science, 1-17.

Murdoch, D. (2009). Teaching principals in smaller primary schools: Their issues, challenges and concerns.

    TEACH Journal of Christian Education, 3(1), 32-37.

Naidoo, P. (2019). Perceptions of teachers and school management teams of the leadership roles of public-

    school principals. *South African Journal of Education,*39(2), 1-14.

    http://doi.10.15700/saje.v39n2a11534

Naidoo, P., & Petersen, N. (2015). Towards a leadership programme for primary school principals as

    instructional leaders. *South African Journal of Childhood Education,*5, (3), 1-8. http://

    doi.10.4102/sajce.v5i3.371

Naparan, G. B., & Alinsug,V,G. (2021). Classroom strategies of multigrade teachers. *Social Sciences &*

    *Humanities Open,*3(1), 1-6. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2021.100109

Newton, P. M., & Wallin, D. (2013). The teaching principal: An untenable position or a promising model?

    Alberta Journal of Educational Research, 59, (1), 55-71. https://doi.org/10.11575/ajer.v59i1.55675

Onderi, H., & Makori, A. (2013). Secondary school principals in Nyamira County in Kenya: Issues and

    Challenges. *Educational Research International,*1 (1),67-89.

Pizzoli, E., & Gong, X. (2007). How to best classify rural and urban. In *ponencia presentada en la Fourth*

International Conference on Agriculture Statistics, pp. 22-24.

Preston, J. P., & Barnes, K.E. (2017). Successful leadership in rural schools: Cultivating collaboration. *Rural Educator,*38(1), 6-15. http:// doi:10.35608/ruraled.v38i1.231

Preston, J. P., Jakubiec, B.A., & Kooymans, R. (2013). Common challenges faced by rural principals: A review of the literature. *The Rural Educator,*35, (1), 1–12.

Punch, K.F., & Oancea, A. (2014). *Introduction to research methods in education.* Sage.

The Republic of South Africa, (RSA). (1996). *South African Schools Act No. 84 of 1996*. Government Gazette. Government Press

Roberts, P., & Downes, N. (2019). The rural difference trope: Leader perceptions on rural, regional and remote schooling difference. *Leading & Managing,*25(2),51-65.

Salazar, P. S. (2007). The Professional Development Needs of Rural High School Principals: A seven State study. *The rural educator,*28(3), 20–27. https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v28i3.475

Schleicher, A. (2012).*Preparing teachers and developing school leaders for the 21st century: Lessons from around the world*. OECD Publishing.

Sebastian, J., & Allensworth, E. (2012). The influence of principal leadership on classroom instruction and student learning: A study of mediated pathways to learning. *Educational administration quarterly,*48(4), 626-663. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X11436273

Starr, K., & White, S. (2008). The small rural school principalship: Key challenges and cross-school responses. *Journal of Research in Rural Education,* 23(5),1-15.

Taole, M.J. (2014). Multigrade teaching: A daunting challenge for rural teachers. *Studies of Tribes and Tribals,*12(1), 95-102. htpp:// doi:10.1080/0972639X.2014.11886690

Tingle, E., Corrales, A., & Peters, M.L. (2017). Leadership development programs: Investing in school principals. *Educational Studies*,45, (1),1-16. https:// doi:10.1080/03055698.2017.1382332

Wallin, D. C., & Newton, P. (2014).Teaching principals in small rural schools: "My cup overfloweth. *Alberta Journal of Educational Research,*60(4), 708-725.

Wildy, H., & Clarke, S. (2012). Leading a small remote school: In the face of a culture of acceptance. *Education, 3-13(1),* 63-74.

Wildy, H., Siguräardóttir,S.M., & Faulkner, R. (2014). Leading the small rural school in Iceland and Australia: Building leadership capacity. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership,*42, (4), 104-118. https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143213513188

Wise, D. (2015). Emerging Challenges Facing School Principals. *Education Leadership Review,*16, (2), 103-115.