

Instructional Leadership Challenges in Rural Multigrade Schools

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ABSTRACT

School leadership is regarded as the cornerstone of the successful provisioning of quality education. This qualitative study draws from principals' accounts of their instructional leadership challenges in rural multigrade schools. The research, situated within an interpretivist paradigm and the theoretical lens of instructional leadership, sought to understand the challenges that principals experience as instructional leaders and how they mitigate the challenges they experience in their rural contexts. Ten purposively selected principals from rural multigrade schools situated in the Vhembe district of Limpopo province participated in the study. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews and were analysed using thematic analysis. The findings show that principals in rural multigrade schools do not participate in induction training to equip them with the knowledge and skill to commence their roles as principals. As a result, they struggle to balance their teaching and management roles. However, fostering teamwork with teachers may be a strategy that could assist principals in managing and successfully executing their duties. Lack of access to technological resources and staffing are serious concerns for the participants in their aim to provide quality education. Active parental involvement supports principals and teacher in their multigrade rural context. This study recommends that principals should undergo training for their role as principals in rural multigrade schools and training on multigrade pedagogies is recommended for both principals and teachers. Understanding challenges that principals in rural multigrade schools experience could help policymakers establish relevant policies that address leadership issues in rural schools.

KEYWORDS

Multigrade; instructional leadership; staffing; rural schools; teamwork; parental involvement; principals.

INTRODUCTION

School leadership is regarded as the cornerstone of the successful provisioning of quality education (Zheng et al., 2017). The prime responsibility of the school principal is to enhance the quality of learning in a school to ensure the overall success of the school (Lunenburg, 2010). To achieve this aim, strong leadership is needed for the school to be successful, and the school principal is in a strategic position to ensure the delivery of quality education. Principals are regarded as instructional leaders which refers to role the principal plays in the management of curriculum and instruction (Gunawan, 2017), thus the teaching and learning processes (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Hallinger et al., 2020; Marishane, 2011). Direct involvement in these processes means that the principal's leadership becomes an important and deciding component in improving the quality of the school. As such, school principals' leadership has received considerable international interest.

The school principal, as an instructional leader, should demonstrate leadership qualities by communicating the school's vision and mission to ensure that the school reaches its vision, carries out its mission, clearly outlines the instructional goals to reach targets, and effectively carries out teaching and learning activities by creating a school culture and climate conducive to learning (McEwan, 2003). Principals' involvement in monitoring learner progress within individual classrooms and across grades is a potent but underemphasised principal activity (Marishane, 2011) and executing this role effectively is a mammoth task placed on the principals' shoulders (Bafadal et al., 2019) and the contexts in which principals often find themselves in hamper them from effectively carrying out their duties (du Plessis, 2017). Principals have complex multi-faceted roles to play and regarded as team builders, instructional leaders, capacity builders, vision builders, resource managers, and instructional programme designers and directors (Marishane, 2011). School context can influence, define and shape the school principals' leadership practices. Therefore, how principals of schools located in rural settings conduct their affairs will determine their success or failure as instructional leaders. Rural communities place high expectations on school principals, as they want the school leaders to be engaged in the affairs of their communities which means that leadership could be a challenge.

Research in South Africa has used different lenses to focus on principals' roles in a rural context. For example, Renihan and Noonan (2012) addressed the role of principals as assessment leaders in rural schools. The focus was on how principals enact their assessment leadership responsibilities. Du Plessis and Mestry (2019) looked broadly at the challenges experienced by teachers in rural schools in the South African context. Their studies found that one of the rural schools' most serious challenges is the employment and retention of qualified teachers with good teaching records. The employment and retention of skilled teachers with solid teaching records are among the most significant issues facing principals in rural schools. Du Plessis, and Mestry (2019) revealed that policymakers and others frequently need to pay more attention to teaching challenges in rural South African schools. Malindi (2021) claimed

that compared to education in urban areas, rural education in South Africa is still underfunded and lacking in resources. However, more research should focus on understanding the challenges principals in multigrade rural schools experience as instructional leaders.

This article aims to present and discuss the results of an exploratory case study to learn more about how principals in rural multigrade schools view and act upon their roles as instructional leaders. Particular attention was on how principals perceive their challenges in a rural context. The key questions posed to the participants were as follows:

- What key challenges do principals experience as instructional leaders in their rural context?
- What strategies do principals use to navigate their rural context?

Understanding principals' experiences in a rural context with multigrade teaching could help policymakers establish relevant policies that address leadership issues in rural schools.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Rural Schools

The concept of rurality does not enjoy a common interpretation among researchers. Rurality is “a condition of place-based homeliness shared by people with common ancestry or heritage who inhabit traditional, culturally defined areas or places statutorily recognised as rural” (Chigbu, 2013, p, 185). Rurality is closely associated with histories and structures that have created conditions and circumstances of oppression, deprivation, disadvantage and deficit among social groups and where resources were inadequately provided (DHET, 2013). Thirty-three percent of South Africa's population, according to the World Bank (2018), can be categorised as rural. According to Abdulwakeel (2017), rurality is where farm activities are pronounced, coupled with low population size and density and remoteness.

In this study's context, defining a rural school is essential. Rural schools tend to be located further from the cities and because they are located far from urban centres, there is a lack of essential infrastructure like roads, power, water, toilet systems and washrooms, access to the internet and ICT (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019; Morales-Ocaña et al., 2017). Rural schools are widely distributed throughout South Africa's provinces. These schools, 3 060 secondary and 8 192 elementary schools among the 11 252 schools located in rural areas (Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2015), are primarily located in the rural regions of the Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Limpopo. About 72% of all rural children reside in just these three provinces with KwaZulu-Natal having the most significant population, with 2.6 million children (or 62 percent) living in rural areas.

Rural schools have some strengths but face unique challenges (Sundeen & Kalos, 2022). The school enrolment in rural schools ranges between 30 and 120 learners which means that school sizes are often extremely small. Rural schools, districts, and villages can offer advantages such as vital connections between students and teachers and small-town atmospheres (du Plessis, 2017). However, literature has identified challenges that rural schools face. Issues, that

impact the delivery of high-quality teaching and student achievement (Omodan, 2022), include amongst others, are poor infrastructure and facilities, system and administrative problems, limited number of teachers, lack of qualified teachers, and curriculum challenges (DBE,2015b), lack of resources and learners' socio-economic background (Moore et al., 2020; Troester-Trate, 2020).

Staffing is challenge facing rural schools. Finding appropriately skilled or competent employees for the various positions at the right time and ensuring that they remain with the organisation is a challenge (Dlamini et al., 2022). According to Nasurdin et al. (2016), staffing is supplying sufficient skilled personnel to fill the open jobs in an organisation. This implies a long-term commitment for both the organisation and the potential employee to be part of the organisation. Compared to non-rural schools, rural schools often have fewer staff members who frequently do several duties. For instance, a teacher may coordinate a feeding scheme programme while overseeing other teachers' performance and serving as head teacher for a particular subject. Rural areas do not attract qualified and experienced teachers and if they are appointed to a rural area, they do not tend to stay for an extended period. Du Plessis (2014, p.1112) reports that “the lack of qualified teachers in many rural schools is simply because teachers do not want to stay in rural areas due to social, professional and cultural isolation”. In addition, teachers in rural schools are poorly regarded and have limited career options (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019; Inan, 2014). Thus, lack of staff and lack of suitably qualified and experienced teachers may influence learner achievement and school performance in general, particularly as teaching multigrade classrooms is difficult if teachers lack training and teaching experience (Brown, 2010).

The principal, as the leader, has many roles and responsibilities which as indicated above, is managing human resources as well as fiscal resource. Insufficient funding from the state places an enormous challenge on school leaders to run the school effectively and efficiently. Du Plessis and Mestry (2019) suggest that the Department of Basic Education (DBE) should provide more funding to South Africa's rural schools as these are located in underdeveloped areas where unemployment reduces parental support (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019) and community members cannot assist the schools as they are mostly unemployed.

Multigrade Schools

The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (RSA, 1996a) and the South African Schools Act (RSA, 1996b) indicate that every South African learner should have access to learning and teaching, similar facilities, and equal educational opportunities. However, schools located communities in rural areas where enrolment does not warrant the establishment of mono-grade classes, multigrade education is one of the methods to ensure access to high-quality education for all school-age children (Naparan & Castañeda, 2021). According to Brown (2010), multigrade teaching where a single teacher is responsibility for teaching learners across more than one curriculum grade, is being used to promote the achievement of sustainable human development goals by making sure every child gets an opportunity to have a primary education.

In the South African context, multigrade teaching is also introduced to deal with low learner enrolment and the shortage of teachers (DBE, 2015b). However, Brown (2010) emphasises that multigrade teaching is not a panacea for the lack of teachers but allows greater access to education than would have been possible otherwise with the limited number of teachers.

Multigrade schools, where one or more classes are taught simultaneous in the same classroom by one teacher, are deemed viable options to provide access to education for learners in rural areas. However, teaching in a multigrade classroom is inherently challenging (Naparar & Castañeda, 2021) and for these schools to achieve their mandate, leadership is critical.

School principals significantly enhance learners' success and achieve educational goals (DBE, 2015b; Mestry, 2017). However, being a principal in a rural multigrade school is challenging as the rural and urban divide widens with issues such as badly maintained school infrastructure, teachers with lack of relevant qualifications, insufficient teaching and learning resources, minimal professional development opportunities and absence of good school management (Taole, 2014; Taole & Mncube, 2012). As principals in these contexts have to teach and manage the school, they require training in running such schools (Mutambala, 2022).

Rural School Leadership

Influential leaders are thought to be the catalyst for learner success (Preston & Barnes, 2017; Robinson, 2011). According to the Department (DBE, 2015a), principals are expected to lead teaching and learning and manage the school as an organisation. These roles are laudable but were crafted with a monograde school in mind; they do not consider the context of principals in a rural multigrade context. School leadership is essential in the quest for quality teaching and learning where learner achievement occupies centre stage. According to Preston and Barnes (2017), the school context, such as the school community and the geographical setting, influences leadership in these schools, suggesting that the individual school realities dictate how the school is managed. A 'one-size-fits-all' approach cannot be applied when dealing with the challenges of principals in rural multigrade schools, but a differentiated approach is advisable as every school is unique.

Moreover, principals in rural multigrade school have complex multi-faceted roles and are usually expected to perform a myriad of duties within the school context. They act as school leaders (Preston & Barnes, 2017), active members of the community (Preston & Barnes, 2017), community role models (Freie & Eppley, 2014; Latham et al., 2014; Morrow, 2012), and teachers with little or no support (Parson et al., 2016). Additionally, principals have to organise class visits, balance the demands of teaching many subjects, carry out assessments and uphold discipline (Aziz, 2011; Eppley, 2009; Taylor & Mulhall, 2001). On a positive note, due to the size of the schools, principals tend to have close relationships with staff members (Msila, 2012).

Literature has indicated that principals of rural schools experience challenges such as a lack of professional development, isolation, budget constraints and a lack of collaboration with other principals due to their schools' geographical location (Latham et al., 2014; Miller-Vaz, 2015; Newton & Wallin, 2013). Leadership is thus a unique challenge for principals of rural

multigrade schools but can be incredibly challenging for novice principals (Spillane & Lee, 2014) in navigating their new leadership role and struggling with time management, a lack of policy knowledge, timely completion of paperwork, curriculum knowledge and budget management (Nelson et al., 2008; Starr & White, 2008).

Parental Involvement

Parental involvement is multi-dimensional (Shaked, 2022). Although parental involvement is seen as a critical ingredient in learners' academic success, researchers need more consensus regarding its definition (Boonk et al., 2018; Yulianti et al., 2022). Barr and Saltmarsh (2014) define parental involvement as parents' shared responsibility for their children's education; that is, parental involvement denotes parents or caregivers' active participation in their children's education (Duan et al., 2018).

Shaked (2022) distinguished two components of parental involvement, namely, direct involvement and indirect component. The direct component relates to active parents' participation in the children's work, both school-based work, such as parents' engagement with school, for example, attending parents' meetings and attending school-based events and home-based work, such as parental communication with the child at home on school issues, assisting with homework. Indirect parental is about parents' beliefs and aspirations concerning the value of education and the standard they expect of their children. Literature has identified benefits of parental involvement as better attendance and discipline (Woluter & van der Walt, 2020), a low dropout rate (Malone, 2017), increased student achievement (Jeynes, 2018) and improved learner behaviour (Tan, 2018).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study employed instructional leadership as a lens to understand the challenges that principals experience as instructional leaders in rural schools with multigrade teaching and how they mitigate the challenges they experience in their contexts. Instructional leadership is conceptualised as a model of instructional leadership that focuses on improving the quality of teaching and learning (Gunawan, 2017). According to Marishane (2011), the term instructional leader entails the principal's primary role in the quest for educational excellence. Based on the instructional leadership view of the school principal, the principal takes a strong and directive approach to curriculum activities and instructional development. As instructional leaders, principals are concerned with teaching and learning activities to enhance student academic achievement (Hallinger et al., 2020) and as such, monitor teachers' performance to ensure improved learner performance (Kwan, 2020).

Researchers have proposed different frameworks for instructional leadership. Robinson et al. (2008) identified a five-dimensional instructional leadership in education framework which includes defining objectives and expectations, strategic resourcing, planning, coordinating and evaluating teaching and the curriculum, encouraging and taking part in the professional development of teachers and ensuring a calm and welcoming atmosphere. Hallinger et al.

(2020) proposed three dimensions of instructional leadership which include defining the school mission, managing the instructional programme and developing a positive school climate. Defining the school mission, which is concerned with goals and school outcomes, entails leading the staff in developing schoolwide goals and communicating them to the entire school community. Managing the instructional programme involves monitoring, controlling and supervising teaching and the curriculum (Shaked, 2022). Principals are also responsible for creating a positive school climate and creating a culture of continuous development and high expectations for teachers and learners (Shaked, 2022) but where teachers and learners are safe and valued. As instructional leaders, principals act as team builders because they bring teachers, parents, and other community members together to collaborate in governance, management, teaching and learning (Marishane, 2011).

Some barriers constrain the principals' duties as instructional leaders. These are a lack of knowledge of the curriculum and instruction, professional norms, district office expectations and role diversity (Hallinger and Murphy, 1985; Marishane, 2011). Bafadal et al. (2019) identify the following constraints to instructional leadership: the vision, mission and goals are not clear and accurate, the initiatives to foster a learning culture have not received much attention from the principal and a productive teaching and learning environment has not been created.

METHODOLOGY

This study applied a qualitative research approach (Creswell, 2014) and used a case study design to understand the phenomenon in its real-life context (Yin, 2009). The unique feature of this case study is that learner enrolment in multigrade schools, ranging from 25 to 120, and these schools (despite enrolling Grades R to 7 learners) have a limited number of teachers. Furthermore, a qualitative case study approach is practical for investigating and understanding complex issues in natural world settings (Harrison et al., 2017). The qualitative approach enabled the researchers to obtain detailed and rich descriptions of the participants' leadership experiences in multigrade schools. The interpretivist research aimed to understand the meaning participants attach to their social world through their experiences (Creswell, 2014) and thus allowed the researchers to perceive the research context as unique, considering the participants' specific circumstances (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020).

Convenience sampling was used to select schools. Since most rural schools are scattered and located in hard-to-reach areas due to bad road conditions, convenience sampling was considered a practical method in this study, searching for subjects of the population who were easily accessible to the researchers. Purposive sampling was used to select participants from 16 schools in one of the circuits in the Vhemebe district of the Limpopo Province. The selection criteria focused on individuals' experience as multigrade teachers teaching in rural multigrade schools for over five years. Ten principals were selected from different rural multigrade schools in the circuit where learner enrolment (see Table 1 for participants' demographic information. ranged from 103 to 203 serving Grades 1 to 7. The sample was gender representative as both

men and women were selected to participate in the study. Sampled principals had teaching responsibilities but did not have heads of departments to assist with managerial duties. At the time of data collection, temporary assistant teachers, who did not have teaching qualifications, were appointed to monitor learners during classroom activities when the principal was involved in teaching the other grade/s, but they themselves were not allowed to teach.

Data collection and analysis

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews. These interviews, which lasted each between 45 to 60 minutes, gave the participants the freedom to respond, and the researchers the opportunity to probe when necessary. Following an interview guide based on the research question: *What key challenges do principals experience as instructional leaders in their rural context?* participants were asked about their leadership experiences in multigrade schools and the challenges they face. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed inductively using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which involves identifying, analysing and reporting repeated patterns across the collected data (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). This method was deemed appropriate for the study since it aimed to analyse principals' opinions, views, information and experiences in their leadership positions in rural multigrade schools (Bengtsson, 2016).

Coding was used and it allowed for the identification and assignment of codes to the fundamental concepts representing the participants' instructional leadership experiences in rural multigrade schools (Leedy & Ormond, 2005). During coding, a list of codes developed was kept, and statements according to the appropriate codes in the list. When data coding was completed, it was categorised and developed into themes (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Member checking was conducted to ensure the credibility of the findings. In addition, after data transcription, two colleagues verified the themes that emerged from the data.

FINDINGS

Participant's profile

In presenting the findings, codes (Participants A – J) distinguish the ten participant principals. Table 1 presents the participants' demographic information.

Ten multigrade principals participated in the study. Of the ten participants, seven were males, and three were females. As indicated by Davids (2018), although female teachers make up about 68% of the country's teaching force, only 36% of principals are women, an indication that high leadership positions are dominated by men. Most participants teach different grades and phases. For example, Principal H teaches Grades 1-7. All schools have small staff numbers, which is why school principals have a huge teaching workload. It is worth pointing out that although most principals have more teaching experience in multigrade schools, their experiences as multigrade principals are less.

Table 1.*Participants' demographic information*

Participant	Gender	Configuration of multigrade classes in schools	Years in current role as principal	Teaching experience in a multigrade school	Number of staff members	Number of learners
A	Female	Grade R & 1 Grades 2 & 3	1	6	3	103
B	Male	Grades 1 & 2 4 & 5	3	8	5	194
C	Male	Grades 1 & 2 Grades 2 & 3 Grades 5,6 &7	1	5	4	143
D	Male	Grades 2 & 3 Grades 4, 5,6 & 7	4	8	5	203
E	Female	Grades 1 & 2 4 & 5	2	10	4	141
F	Male	Grades 1 & 2 Grades 2 & 3 Grades 5, 6& 7	5	8	4	123
G	Female	Grades R & 1 Grades 2,3 & 4	1	9	4	127
H	Male	Grades 1 & 2 Grades 2 & 3 Grades 5,6 & 7	3	15	3	143
I	Male	Grades 1 & 2 Grades 4,5, & 6	2	10	4	162
J	Male	Grades R & 1 Grades 2 & 3	2	10	4	143

Six themes emerged from the data analysis. These were: new principals' induction, balancing teaching and management roles, staffing, lack of technological resources, teacher teamwork, and parental involvement.

New principals' induction

Induction in a school environment ensures principals are conversant with their role expectations. This study's findings reveal that although induction is vital when principals assume a new position, irrespective of experience, particularly in rural multigrade schools, participants indicated that they did not participate in an induction programme. Induction is particularly important for principals as instructional leaders to develop knowledge of curriculum.

"No, I did not receive induction. We only attended workshops which I do not think that they are induction; we were not trained or assisted on how to run a multigrade school." (Participant A)

"No training for running principals, including multigrade principals. There is no training from the education department on managing and running multigrade schools. I feel overwhelmed having to deal with teaching and running the school." (Participant E)

Some participants were inducted into their new roles, but felt that the duration of their induction was insufficient. Participant C mentioned:

"I do attend training for principals. The department arranges the training. I attend the induction of newly appointed in training is for two days. I do not think it is not enough" (C)

The participant responses illustrate that induction for new principals is vital to equip them for their new roles in rural multigrade schools. Some participants attended training workshops but felt the focus was not on leadership in rural multigrade schools and the duration of the workshop was insufficient to prepare them for their new roles.

Striking a balance between teaching and management roles

This theme relates to how participants manage their managerial roles and teaching in terms of ensuring a balance between their teaching responsibilities and administrative tasks. Participants H and G said:

It is not easy to teach more classes and manage the school simultaneously. I cannot cope. (Participant H)

"I do my administrative tasks after school. Because if I do not do that, I will be left with my work and submissions that should be done." (Participant G)

I know that I need to conduct class visits and check teachers' work, but I cannot do that because I am also responsible for teaching. However, I make sure that I teach my learners, and as such, my administrative duties suffer. (H)

The responses reveal that participants were challenged in balancing the various roles that they have to play. Teaching take precedence and this is so important with multigrade classes where the principals teach three to four grades in one class and as a result, has to work after school hours to fulfil the requirements of their professions. Because of time constraints, participants indicated they could not schedule class visits and check teachers' lesson plans as they also have scheduled teaching responsibilities in addition to administrative responsibilities. The findings showed that teaching duties are a priority and as a result, principals worked after school hours to complete their administrative responsibilities. Participants were challenged in creating and maintaining a balance between their own teaching responsibilities, administrative duties and their role as instructional leaders in supporting and monitoring their teachers to ensure quality teaching and learning.

Staffing

Staffing of human resources in any organisation is one of the critical elements in management. A number of issues were raised about adequate staffing as teachers are critical to the teaching and learning process.

All the principals indicated that human resources needed to increase to address staffing issues.

"I have very few teachers in my school to teach all our grades. It is a burden on my staff. They are overwhelmed by the work, and there is nothing I can do for them". (Participant I)

"I have been asking the district office to provide me with more teachers, but they always say they do not have a budget for new teachers. They say their budget is for monograde schools. (Participant F).

Participants suggested that staffing shortages could be caused by the Department's lack of funding. Additional funding for rural multigrade schools would mean that more teachers could augment the skeletal staff and assist in delivery of equality education. The implementation of multigrade class is challenging with teachers managing two or three classes in one classroom.

"I always compare myself with principals who are managing mono-grade schools. Teachers in monograde schools have to focus on one grade. However, it is a different case with my teachers here. They have to focus on more grades in one class. (Participant B)

The response revealed that participants were aware of the load that teachers in rural multigrade teacher bear. Participants indicated they need more staff members as their teachers were under pressure to cope with multiple classes effectively. Teachers in managing multigrade classes need to be well trained and experienced to ensure quality education. However, ensuring that rural multigrade schools are staffed with committed and experienced teachers is a challenge.

"Some teachers dislike teaching in multigrade schools. They prefer not to work in rural areas" (Participant F).

Participants suggested teachers' attitudes toward multigrade teaching might contribute to poor staffing, and if they have only been trained in monograde teaching, they might view multigrade teaching as demanding and far more complex. In addition, the isolation of teaching in a rural area with low socio-economic conditions might contribute to negative attitudes and result in inadequate staffing.

Lack of technological resources

Technology is one of the resources that is needed for the advancement of 21st-century education. However, the participants' responses indicated a lack of provision and access to technology resources in many rural multigrade schools. The following are some of the views of participants:

"We are not using technological resources since we do not have them in the school. We rely on resources such as charts and posters for teaching." (Participant A).

"I wish I could use technology to do my admin work and present class lessons. I cannot do that because the school does not have money to buy the kind of technology I need. I have asked the district office to buy us a laptop and a projector, but they say they do not have money." (Participant B)

Participants concerning the use of technology expressed a variety of perspectives. Participants raised the issue of lack of funding for the provision of technological resources such as overhead projectors, computers, smart boards and laptops and other necessary technological resources to for access to a range of information and teaching and learning materials.

The use of technology in the teaching and learning process adds another dimension to the teaching approach, motivating learners to become more engaged and interested. In one case, the principal used his own laptop to access videos to support the lesson content prior to completing the assessment activities.

"Regarding technology, we do not have projectors; I always ask my learners to watch videos from my laptop. After watching videos from the laptop, they can complete the assessment activities given to them. (Participant D)

Some schools do have computers, but these are outdated. Old computers do not have the necessary functions and need to be compliant with current advanced technology.

"Computers that we have are old. We only use them to teach learners how to type some few things." (Participant C).

Two concerns arise here. Learners need access to computers to become computer literate in order to operate in today's world and teachers' practice is enhanced with the use of technology. The use of ICT in the classroom has a positive effect on the teaching and learning process as it creates an engaging and stimulating experience for learners.

Teamwork with teachers

Teamwork is important in rural multigrade schools where there are many roles to be played and many tasks to be performed. It is vital that the principal and his teachers work as a team and build good relationships. Participants shared the following about teamwork:

"I delegate some duties to my teachers. I work well with them because we are just a small number, so we help each other. There was much administrative work that needed to be done. I cannot handle all these by myself" (Participant A)

"Teachers are beneficial, and we have a good working relationship. I asked them often to assist me with some administrative tasks. They are always ready and willing to assist me because they understand my situation." (Participant C)

The findings revealed that the principals nurtured a working relationship with the teachers and was able delegated some of duties to the teachers. Teamwork improves efficiency and productivity and when tasks are divided between team member, responsibilities are shares and outcomes are reached. Working as a team build the strong relationship between the participants and staff members.

Parental involvement

Parents play an essential role and have a major influence in the education of their children. In addition, they are considered stakeholders.

"Parents are very supportive. They come during meetings, and they assist their children with homework." (Participant G)

Parents do come to the meetings, especially when I call them. I support teachers by inviting parents to school to discuss the learners' progress and other related issues, such as their children's behaviour and attendance. Some learners tend to miss school, so I call the parents or any elder responsible for the child to find out why. (Participant A)

The findings reveal that parents respond positively to being involved in their children's education by attending meetings and consultations about the academic achievement learner behaviour and attendance.

Although principals in rural multigrade schools generally receive support from community members, some principals indicated that due to economic circumstances there was little involvement of parents. Some parents work away from their homes in other towns or provinces, and learners are left with grandparents who in many cases are not well educated.

"Most of the parents are working far from home. It is difficult to get them involved in school activities. Their children are left with grandparents who can hardly read or write." (Participant E)

Participants reported that although most parents are involved in their children's education, some parents are not active. Parental involvement ensures that learners develop a love of learning, attend school regularly, are well behaved and achieve good academic outcomes, all of which sets learners up for success.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Induction into a leadership role remains important for ensuring principals are guided on what is expected of them as school leaders. This study has revealed that new principals do not participate in an induction programme by the Department. Principals have to navigate their way through the system little or no assistance from Departmental officials. Mutambala (2022) reported that multigrade school managers require induction in running such schools. Many scholars concur that rural principals must be inducted to execute their duties diligently (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019; Freie & Eppley, 2014; Latham et al., 2014). Bafadal et al. (2019) suggests that school principals should be highly committed, but have good administrative skills in order to perform the required tasks effectively. These skills will ensure they support their teachers and run their schools diligently. Furthermore, as instructional leaders, principals are expected to manage the instructional programme (Shaked, 2022; Hallinger et al., 2022). Principals can only perform this task if they are equipped with the relevant knowledge and skills acquired through an induction training programme and continuous professional support. Lack of training does not support principals' instructional leadership efforts.

Principals, as instructional leaders, are required to create a positive school climate (Shaked, 2022) but they wear many hats as they execute their duties in their schools. Marishane (2011) argues that principals are constrained in the execution of their duties by the diverse roles they have to play. The findings of the study revealed that participants struggled to strike a balance between the teaching and management roles. Time management is widely believed to be an issue among principals in rural multigrade schools as they cannot balance their administrative and teaching responsibilities (Lee, 2015; Nelson et al., 2008). This finding supports Parson et al.'s (2016) claim that principals in rural schools teach with little or no support. In addition, participants indicated they do not have much time to do their management

work as the teaching load for multigrades is heavy. The management and administrative duties are done after hours, although in some cases these suffer as teaching duties take precedence. In multigrade schools principals, who are also teachers, are more likely to be aware of curricular concerns and to be able to advise teachers on issues about teaching and learning (Wallin & Newton, 2013). This study's findings indicate that the rural context shapes how instructional leadership is challenged in supervision and evaluation. Participants found it difficult to schedule class visits or evaluate the work done by teachers. According to Kwan (2020), principals should serve as instructional leaders by regular formal and informal monitoring of teachers' performance which offers information on the progress and achievement of the learners. Instructional leadership requires principals to ensure the quality of teaching and learning (Gunawan, 2017), but a rural multigrade context makes it difficult to effectively achieve this important task.

Staffing is a challenge that principals encounter in rural multigrade schools. It is important to recruit quality teachers to schools; however, many teachers are not interested in teaching in rural areas where multigrade schools tend to be the norm. Rural areas are generally remote and relatively underdeveloped (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019) and schools in the area often have poor infrastructure and facilities, system and administrative problems, (DBE,2015b) and lack of resources (Moore et al., 2020; Troester-Trate, 2020). Teachers posted to rural areas often feel isolated socially, culturally and professionally (Du Plessis, 2014). In addition, teaching multigrade classes is challenging especially when not trained to manage differing levels and places. Cornish (2014) asserts that teachers have negative attitudes toward multigrade teaching and prefer to work in large mono-grade schools in sizeable urban area. Teachers prefer teaching in schools located in metropolitan areas or schools that have access to amenities and better working circumstances over teaching in rural locations where basic services are limited, according to Bertoni et al. (2022).

Lack of technological resources for teaching in multigrade classes emerged as a finding. Few schools are equipped with up-to-date computers and many schools do not have computers at all. Dlamini et al. (2022) argue that teachers require infrastructure relating to ICT in order to function effectively and efficiently. This was reinforced by participants who indicated they require funding from the Department for the technological resources needed for teaching and learning. Du Plessis and Mestry's (2019) reported that the Department does not provide sufficient funding to rural schools in South Africa. They add that provincial governments cannot provide rural schools with the necessary funding they require to ensure that learners receive the education they deserve. Private and corporate funding would assist rural schools in acquiring technical resources for teaching and learning Lack of resources, particularly technological resources especially in this day and age, could influence how teachers view the school climate.

Teamwork is significant in nurturing good relationships within the school with teachers and parents within the school community. According to Msila (2012), principals in rural

multigrade schools develop close-knit relationships with staff members who work as a team to divide up the tasks and responsibilities to achieve the schools goals. This study revealed that principals typically developed strategies to ensure their teaching and managerial duties received the necessary attention by enlisting the help and support of their teachers. This finding reinforced the fact that many participants worked as a team with their staff members and were thus able to ensure the effectiveness of the management of the school.

It is important to note that the findings of this study conflict with those of Du Plessis and Mestry (2019), that parents do not take an interest in their children's education. The current study found that principals managed to get many parents involved in support of their children's education. This aligns with Yulianti et al.'s (2022) assertion that principals are in a position to promote and facilitate parents' involvement in their children's education. When parents are involved in their children's education, children tend to do better academically and improve their behaviour (Boonk et al., 2018). This study has revealed that the principal's active role in involving parents supports their instructional leadership efforts of ensuring that learners' academic success is enhanced. Principals carry the responsibilities as team instructional to foster parental involvement by bringing together teachers and parents to ensure learner success.

CONCLUSION

This study was undertaken to report on principals' leadership experiences in rural multigrade schools. This study was informed by various concepts: multigrade schools, rural schools and school leadership. Principals in rural multigrade schools are expected to teach and manage their school, keep up with their responsibilities and ensure the smooth running of the school. The study's findings indicate that principals in rural multigrade schools do not participate in induction workshops to ensure they have the knowledge and skills to commence their roles as principals. The lack of training often results in the challenge of balancing their teaching and management roles. In addition, staffing and lack of technological resources challenge principals and teachers in rural multigrade schools.

Based on the findings, this study proposes that teamwork among stakeholders should be fostered to assist principals in managing and successfully executing their duties in rural multigrade schools. In addition, the study recommends training on multigrade teaching for both principals and teachers. Understanding principals' experiences in rural multigrade schools could help policymakers establish relevant policies that address leadership issues in rural schools.

The limitations of this study were that it was conducted in a small area in Limpopo province with a limited sample of 10 principals.

It is recommended that further research involve a range of stakeholders such as teachers, parents, and even learners. The area of research could be widened to include other rural areas in South Africa's provinces. Finally, the use of a questionnaire and/or observations of teachers in multigrade classrooms could yield more in-depth data.

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