



Original Article | Peer Reviewed | Open Access

International Journal of Social Policy and Education

Vol. 8, No. 1; 2026. pp 26 – 53

ISSN 2689-4998 (print), 2689-5013 (online)

Published by International Center for Promoting Knowledge

Article Details: Received 13 April 2026 | Accepted 11 May 2026

Online Published: 13 June 2026

DOI: 10.61494/ijspe.v8a2, URL: <https://doi.org/10.61494/ijspe.v8n1a2>

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Investigating teachers' perceptions of pedagogical challenges in multigrade Junior Primary Classrooms of Kunene Region in Namibia

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ABSTRACT

Multigrade teaching is widely used to expand access to education in sparsely populated rural areas, yet it presents persistent pedagogical and systemic challenges. This study investigated the experiences of junior primary teachers in multigrade classrooms in the Kunene Region of Namibia, focusing on instructional practices, curriculum demands, learner support, and institutional conditions. A qualitative approach was employed, using questionnaires, classroom observations, lesson artefacts, and reflective discussions. The findings reveal that teachers face significant challenges related to time constraints, heavy workloads, and complex curriculum demands, which often affect the quality and consistency of teaching delivery. Limited teaching resources, inadequate training, and professional isolation further restrict the implementation of learner-centred approaches. The study concludes that multigrade teaching challenges are largely systemic rather than individual. It recommends targeted professional development, context-responsive curriculum adaptation, improved resource provision, and strengthened institutional support to enhance teaching effectiveness and learner outcomes in rural multigrade settings.

Keywords: *Multigrade teaching; Junior primary education; Rural schools; Teacher experiences; Curriculum implementation; Kunene Region; Namibia*

1. INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND

Multigrade teaching is a widespread and enduring feature of education systems in rural and resource-constrained contexts across the globe. It is particularly prevalent in developing countries, where geographical dispersion, low population density, and limited educational resources necessitate alternative approaches to schooling (Little, 2020). Multigrade teaching refers to the practice of instructing learners from two or more grade levels within a single classroom, typically by one teacher, and is widely recognised as a pragmatic strategy for expanding access to education in hard-to-reach areas (UNESCO, 2023; OECD, 2021; Little, 2021). While this approach ensures

inclusion of learners in remote communities, it simultaneously introduces complex pedagogical, organisational, and professional demands for teachers (Hyry-Beihammer & Hascher, 2021; Kamal & Raza, 2022). Recent studies further emphasise that multigrade education should not merely be viewed as a compensatory strategy for rural schooling, but as a specialised pedagogical context requiring context-responsive curriculum adaptation, differentiated instruction, and sustained teacher support (Ares-Ferreiros et al., 2025; Veenman, 2022).

In Namibia, multigrade teaching gained prominence after independence as part of national efforts to ensure equitable access to education for all learners, regardless of geographical location or socio-economic background (Siririka, 2018; Makuwa & Kapenda, 2022). The implementation of staffing norms, particularly the teacher–learner ratio of 1:35 in primary schools, further entrenched the use of multigrade classrooms. In sparsely populated rural areas, where learner enrolment is insufficient to form single-grade classes, teachers are required to teach multiple grades within one classroom in order to comply with policy directives (Haingura, 2014; Makuwa & Kapenda, 2022). Consequently, multigrade teaching has become a structural and unavoidable reality in several regions, including Kunene, Kavango West, and Zambezi (UNESCO, 2023).

Multigrade classrooms are inherently heterogeneous, comprising learners of different ages, cognitive levels, linguistic backgrounds, and academic abilities (Ares-Ferreiros et al., 2025; Hyry-Beihammer & Hascher, 2021). Such diversity presents both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, research suggests that multigrade settings can foster peer learning, collaboration, and learner autonomy, particularly when teachers employ differentiated and learner-centred pedagogies (Little, 2021; Kamal & Raza, 2022). On the other hand, the demands of teaching multiple curricula simultaneously, managing classroom interactions, and ensuring equitable learning opportunities place significant strain on teachers, especially in under-resourced contexts (Mtetwa & Ndemo, 2022; OECD, 2021).

In rural regions such as Kunene, these challenges are intensified by contextual factors including limited infrastructure, shortages of qualified teachers, and inadequate teaching and learning materials. Studies indicate that teachers in such contexts often rely on improvised resources and traditional teaching methods, which may limit learner engagement and conceptual understanding (Makuwa & Kapenda, 2022; Kamal & Raza, 2022). Furthermore, the multilingual nature of

Namibian classrooms adds complexity to instructional delivery. Learners frequently speak different home languages and must transition to English as the medium of instruction, a process that can hinder comprehension and participation, particularly in the early grades where foundational skills are developed (UNESCO, 2023; Mtetwa & Ndemo, 2022).

Despite its prevalence, multigrade teaching in Namibia remains under-supported in terms of policy guidance, teacher preparation, and professional development. National curriculum frameworks and assessment systems are largely designed for monograde classrooms, offering limited direction for integrating multiple grade levels within a single instructional setting (UNESCO, 2023; Hyry-Beihammer & Hascher, 2021). As a result, teachers are often required to adapt curriculum content independently, which can lead to inconsistencies in teaching quality and learner outcomes (Makuwa & Kapenda, 2022). Evidence further indicates that multigrade teachers face persistent challenges related to lesson planning, time management, classroom organisation, and assessment practices (Kamal & Raza, 2022; OECD, 2021).

In addition, teachers in remote regions frequently experience professional isolation due to limited access to in-service training, mentoring, and collaborative professional learning opportunities (Miller, 2019). This lack of institutional support contributes to negative perceptions of multigrade teaching, which is often viewed as burdensome and overwhelming rather than as a context for pedagogical innovation (Mtetwa & Ndemo, 2022; Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). Without sustained support and targeted interventions, these challenges risk undermining the quality of education provided in multigrade classrooms and perpetuating disparities between rural and urban schooling contexts (OECD, 2021).

Although research on multigrade teaching has expanded globally, there remains a notable lack of empirical studies focusing on the Namibian context, particularly in remote regions such as Kunene. Existing studies often provide general descriptions of challenges but offer limited insight into teachers' lived experiences, perceptions, and adaptive strategies in multigrade classrooms (Makuwa & Kapenda, 2022; Hyry-Beihammer & Hascher, 2021). Furthermore, there is insufficient evidence on the types of professional and institutional support required to enhance teaching effectiveness in these settings (Mulryan, 2017).

This study therefore seeks to address this gap by exploring junior primary teachers' perceptions of pedagogical challenges in multigrade classrooms in the Kunene Region. By foregrounding teachers' experiences, the study contributes context-specific evidence to inform policy, teacher education, and professional development initiatives aimed at improving the quality of education in rural multigrade settings.

1.2 Research Questions

- a) What pedagogical challenges do multigrade teachers face in junior primary classrooms in the Kunene Region?
- b) What forms of support do teachers require to effectively manage multigrade teaching?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Kunene Region is one of the most sparsely populated and geographically remote regions in Namibia, characterised by dispersed settlements, nomadic and semi-nomadic livelihoods, and limited infrastructure. These contextual realities have significant implications for schooling, particularly at the junior primary level where multigrade teaching is prevalent. Multigrade classrooms in Kunene are not a pedagogical choice but a structural necessity arising from low learner enrolment, teacher shortages, and national staffing norms (Makuwa & Kapenda, 2022). While multigrade teaching expands access to education, it simultaneously presents complex pedagogical, curricular, and organisational challenges that shape teachers' instructional practices and professional identities.

Recent scholarship increasingly emphasises that multigrade teaching must be understood within its socio-cultural and geographical context rather than evaluated against monograde norms (Hyry-Beihammer & Hascher, 2021; Little, 2021). In contexts such as Kunene, where classrooms are linguistically and culturally diverse, multigrade teaching intersects with broader issues of equity, language policy, and resource distribution. This literature review synthesises recent studies (2020–2025) across four key themes relevant to multigrade junior primary classrooms.

2.1 Multigrade Teaching as a Structural Reality in Rural and Marginalised Contexts

Multigrade teaching is widely recognised as a defining feature of rural education systems globally, particularly in low-density and hard-to-reach areas (UNESCO, 2023; OECD, 2021). In sub-Saharan Africa, multigrade classrooms are often implemented as a cost-effective strategy to ensure access to basic education in geographically isolated communities (Little, 2021). In Namibia, regions such as Kunene, Kavango West, and Zambezi have a high concentration of multigrade classrooms due to dispersed populations and limited school infrastructure (Makuwa & Kapenda, 2022).

However, recent literature cautions against viewing multigrade teaching merely as a logistical arrangement. Instead, it should be conceptualised as a distinct pedagogical context requiring specialised knowledge, skills, and policy support (Hry-Beihammer & Hascher, 2021). Despite this recognition, policy frameworks in many countries, including Namibia, remain largely aligned with monograde assumptions. National curricula, teacher allocation models, and assessment systems often fail to account for the realities of multigrade teaching, resulting in a structural misalignment between policy expectations and classroom practice (UNESCO, 2023).

In Kunene, this misalignment is intensified by geographic isolation, which limits access to supervision, professional support, and instructional resources. Teachers are frequently required to adapt curriculum content independently, often without formal guidance or training (Joubert, 2020). This situation contributes to the perception of multigrade teaching as a form of institutional neglect rather than a supported pedagogical model (Mtetwa & Ndemo, 2022).

While multigrade teaching has the potential to promote peer learning, collaborative problem-solving, and learner autonomy, these benefits are rarely realised in the absence of targeted support (Kamal & Raza, 2022). Consequently, in contexts such as Kunene, multigrade teaching is often experienced as a survival strategy within a constrained education system rather than as an opportunity for innovation.

Although global and regional studies acknowledge multigrade teaching as a structural necessity, there is limited context-specific empirical research examining how these structural conditions are experienced by teachers in remote Namibian regions such as Kunene. In particular, little is known

about how policy misalignment influences teachers' day-to-day instructional decisions and perceptions in these settings.

2.2 Pedagogical and Teaching Challenges in Junior Primary Multigrade Classrooms

Pedagogical complexity is one of the most significant challenges associated with multigrade teaching. Teachers are required to simultaneously address learners from different grade levels, each with distinct learning outcomes, developmental stages, and instructional needs (Hyry-Beihammer & Hascher, 2021). This complexity is particularly pronounced in junior primary classrooms, where foundational literacy and numeracy skills are developed.

Research indicates that lesson planning in multigrade contexts is cognitively demanding, as teachers must integrate multiple curricula, align learning objectives, and design activities that accommodate diverse learner needs (Kamal & Raza, 2022). In resource-constrained settings such as Kunene, this challenge is exacerbated by limited access to teaching materials, forcing teachers to rely on improvised or repetitive instructional strategies. Such practices may limit opportunities for active learning and conceptual understanding. Emerging scholarship also highlights that effective multigrade pedagogy depends on flexible grouping strategies, learner autonomy, and collaborative learning structures that allow teachers to manage instructional diversity more effectively (Ares-Ferreiros et al., 2025; Little, 2021).

Time management is another critical challenge. Teachers must balance direct instruction with independent learning and classroom supervision, often leading to uneven distribution of instructional time (OECD, 2021). Younger learners, particularly those in pre-primary and Grade 1, require continuous guidance, which may result in older learners receiving less attention. This imbalance can negatively affect learner progression and achievement across grade levels.

In addition, the multilingual nature of Namibian classrooms adds further complexity. Learners in Kunene often come from diverse linguistic backgrounds and may have limited proficiency in the language of instruction. Research suggests that language barriers can hinder comprehension, participation, and assessment performance, particularly in early grades (Mtetwa & Ndemo, 2022). Teachers must therefore navigate not only curricular diversity but also linguistic diversity, often without adequate training in multilingual pedagogy.

These interconnected challenges contribute to teachers' perceptions of multigrade teaching as overwhelming and pedagogically demanding. Rather than enabling innovative teaching practices, the complexity of multigrade classrooms often constrains instructional flexibility and limits the effectiveness of learner-centred approaches (Pridmore, 2017).

While existing studies identify pedagogical challenges in multigrade classrooms, there is insufficient research focusing specifically on early-grade (junior primary) contexts where developmental differences are more pronounced. Additionally, limited attention has been given to how teachers in multilingual rural settings, such as Kunene, navigate the intersection of language diversity and multigrade pedagogy in practice.

2.3 Curriculum Implementation and Assessment in Multigrade Contexts

Curriculum implementation in multigrade classrooms presents significant challenges, particularly in systems where curricula are designed for monograde teaching. Recent literature highlights the lack of explicit guidance on how to integrate multiple grade levels, sequence content, or manage pacing in multigrade settings (UNESCO, 2023). As a result, teachers are required to make independent decisions about curriculum adaptation, often without adequate support.

In practice, this often leads to selective curriculum implementation. Studies indicate that teachers prioritise core subjects such as Mathematics and English while marginalising non-core subjects, including Art, Physical Education, and Religious and Moral Education (Makuwa & Kapenda, 2022). While this prioritisation may be driven by accountability pressures and assessment requirements, it raises concerns about holistic learner development, particularly in early childhood education where play, creativity, and physical activity are essential for cognitive and social growth.

Assessment practices further complicate multigrade teaching. Teachers are expected to design, administer, and record assessments for multiple grade levels, often within the same instructional time (Hyry-Beihammer & Hascher, 2021). This creates a significant administrative burden and limits opportunities for formative assessment. Without regular and effective assessment, it becomes difficult to identify learning gaps and provide targeted support, particularly in foundational literacy and numeracy.

In contexts such as Kunene, where access to specialised support services is limited, these assessment challenges have long-term implications for learner progression. Learners who do not receive early intervention may continue to struggle in later grades, reinforcing cycles of underachievement. The lack of alignment between curriculum expectations and classroom realities therefore represents a critical area of concern in multigrade education.

Although curriculum and assessment challenges are widely acknowledged, there is a lack of empirical evidence on how teachers in multigrade classrooms practically adapt national curricula and assessment tools in real classroom situations. Furthermore, limited research explores how these adaptations affect the teaching of non-core subjects and the broader goal of holistic education in junior primary settings.

2.4 Teacher Preparation, Professional Support, and Perceptions of Multigrade Teaching

Teacher preparedness is a key determinant of effective multigrade teaching. However, research consistently shows that pre-service teacher education programmes are primarily designed for monograde classrooms, leaving graduates inadequately prepared for multigrade contexts (Hry-Beihammer & Hascher, 2021; Mtetwa & Ndemo, 2022). As a result, many teachers enter multigrade classrooms without the necessary pedagogical knowledge and skills.

In-service teachers in regions such as Kunene often report learning multigrade teaching through trial and error rather than through structured professional development. This lack of formal training contributes to uncertainty and reduced confidence in managing multigrade classrooms.

Professional isolation further exacerbates these challenges. Geographic remoteness limits access to workshops, mentoring, and peer collaboration, which are essential for professional growth (OECD, 2021). Teachers in rural schools may have limited opportunities to share experiences, reflect on practice, or access new teaching strategies.

Recent literature highlights the importance of context-specific professional development that is sustained, collaborative, and practice-oriented (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). Such approaches have been shown to improve teacher confidence, instructional quality, and learner outcomes.

However, in Namibia, access to such professional development opportunities remains uneven, particularly in remote regions.

Teachers' perceptions of multigrade teaching are therefore closely linked to the level of institutional support they receive. Where training, resources, and guidance are lacking, multigrade teaching is perceived as burdensome and unsustainable. Conversely, when teachers are supported through targeted interventions, mentoring, and collaborative learning, they are more likely to adopt innovative practices and view multigrade teaching as an opportunity rather than a challenge.

Despite growing recognition of the importance of professional development, there is limited research examining teachers' perceptions of multigrade teaching in Namibia, particularly in remote regions like Kunene. Additionally, few studies explore how teachers' perceived support needs can inform the design of contextually relevant professional development programmes.

2.5 Synthesis and Link to the Study

The reviewed literature highlights that multigrade teaching in rural contexts such as Kunene is shaped by a complex interplay of structural, pedagogical, and institutional factors. While it plays a critical role in ensuring access to education, its effectiveness is constrained by policy misalignment, limited teacher preparation, resource shortages, and inadequate professional support. Importantly, there remains a gap in context-specific empirical research that captures teachers' lived experiences and perceptions of multigrade teaching in Namibia. This study therefore seeks to address this gap by exploring how junior primary teachers in the Kunene Region perceive and navigate pedagogical challenges, thereby contributing to evidence-based strategies for improving multigrade education in rural settings.

3. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The main objective of this study was to explore junior primary teachers' perceptions of pedagogical challenges associated with multigrade teaching in rural schools in the Kunene Region, Namibia. Specifically, the study sought to examine how teachers experience and manage instructional planning, time management, curriculum implementation, assessment practices, and resource constraints within multigrade classroom settings. Furthermore, the study aimed to identify

the forms of professional and institutional support that teachers perceive as necessary to enhance effective teaching and learning in multigrade junior primary classrooms.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Approach and Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research approach within an interpretivist paradigm to explore junior primary teachers' experiences of multigrade teaching and the professional learning outcomes of a structured training workshop conducted in the Kunene Region of Namibia. The interpretivist paradigm was appropriate as the study sought to understand teachers' subjective experiences, reflections, and meaning-making processes related to multigrade pedagogy within their specific instructional contexts.

The study was embedded within a three-day professional development training workshop, adopting a practice-based qualitative design. This design enabled the researchers to capture teachers' reflections on their existing multigrade teaching practices, engage them in structured learning activities, and observe changes in their pedagogical understanding following the intervention. The workshop served both as a capacity-building initiative and as a data-generation context, allowing for reflection-before-training and reflection-after-training insights.

4.2 Research Context

The study was conducted in Opuwo town, located in the Kunene Region, during a three-day training workshop organised by the Kunene Regional Directorate of Education, Arts and Culture. The workshop targeted junior primary teachers teaching in multigrade mobile school units situated outside Opuwo town under the Ondao Unit, which is administratively based in Opuwo.

The Kunene Region is characterised by vast distances, low population density, and nomadic or semi-nomadic livelihoods. Many learners attend mobile schools that operate under challenging conditions, including limited infrastructure, scarce teaching resources, and multi-age, multigrade classroom arrangements. These contextual factors make multigrade teaching a dominant instructional model in the region and underscore the need for targeted professional development interventions.

The training workshop was facilitated by Dr Erastus Kleopas and Dr Tulonga Shuukwanyama, lecturers from the University of Namibia, who were formally invited by the Kunene Regional Directorate to facilitate the programme. The facilitators delivered theoretical input on multigrade teaching and guided participants through practical pedagogical activities.

4.3 Population and Participants

The population for the study comprised junior primary teachers teaching multigrade classes in mobile schools under the Ondao Unit in the Kunene Region. A total of 47 junior primary teachers attended the three-day training workshop and constituted the study participants.

All participants were actively teaching in multigrade classrooms, often combining pre-grade, Grade 1, Grade 2 and Grade 3 learners within a single teaching space. The teachers varied in terms of teaching experience, professional qualifications, and years of service in rural and mobile school contexts. This diversity allowed for a wide range of perspectives on multigrade teaching challenges and professional learning needs.

4.4 Sampling Technique

The study employed purposive sampling, as participants were deliberately selected based on their direct involvement in multigrade junior primary teaching. Purposive sampling was appropriate because the study aimed to generate in-depth, context-specific insights rather than statistically generalisable findings. All 47 teachers who attended the workshop and consented to participate were included in the study, ensuring comprehensive representation of the Ondao Unit multigrade teaching context.

4.5 Data Collection Methods

Multiple qualitative data collection methods were used to enhance the richness and credibility of the findings. These included open-ended questionnaires, observation of workshop activities, analysis of participants' practical tasks, and reflective discussions.

4.5.1 Questionnaires

On the first day of the workshop, participants were issued with open-ended questionnaires designed to elicit their reflections on experiences of multigrade teaching prior to the training. The questionnaires focused on areas such as lesson planning, time management, curriculum implementation, assessment practices, resource availability, and perceived support from education authorities. This method allowed teachers to reflect individually and honestly on their classroom realities.

4.5.2 Practical Activities

During the workshop, participants engaged in hands-on practical tasks, including lesson planning using various multigrade teaching approaches such as differentiated instruction, rotation models, and integrated thematic teaching. Teachers worked individually and in groups to design lesson plans aligned with multigrade contexts. These artefacts were collected and analysed as qualitative data to examine teachers' pedagogical understanding and application of multigrade strategies.

4.5.3 Presentations and Reflective Discussions

Participants presented their lesson plans and group tasks to the entire workshop cohort. These presentations were followed by guided reflective discussions facilitated by the researchers. Observations of these sessions provided insight into teachers' evolving understanding of multigrade pedagogy, peer learning processes, and confidence in applying new strategies. Informal reflective discussions also allowed teachers to articulate changes in perception and practice following the training.

4.5.4 Observations

The facilitators conducted non-participant observations throughout the three days, focusing on teachers' engagement, collaboration, and application of multigrade strategies during activities. Observational notes were recorded systematically and used to triangulate questionnaire responses and artefact data.

4.6 Data Collection Procedures

Data collection followed a structured sequence aligned with the workshop programme. On Day 1, participants completed the open-ended questionnaires before receiving any formal input on multigrade teaching. This provided baseline data on teachers' experiences and challenges. Days 2 and 3 focused on theoretical presentations, practical activities, group work, and presentations. Throughout these sessions, the facilitators observed participants' engagement and documented emerging changes in pedagogical understanding. Data collection concluded with reflective discussions that captured teachers' perceptions of learning gains and professional growth.

The data collection phase focused on generating teachers' reflections, lesson artefacts, observational insights, and collaborative discussions during the workshop activities. The analysis phase occurred after completion of data collection and involved systematic coding, categorisation, and interpretation of the collected qualitative data.

4.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were strictly observed throughout the study. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the Kunene Regional Directorate of Education, Arts and Culture. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any stage without any negative consequences.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured by removing identifying information and using aggregated data in reporting. The dual role of the researchers as facilitators and researchers was addressed through transparency and reflexivity to minimise power imbalances and bias.

4.8 Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted after completion of all workshop activities and data collection procedures to ensure that participants' responses, observations, and artefacts were interpreted holistically. Data were analysed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach. Questionnaire responses, observational notes, lesson planning artefacts, and reflective discussion summaries were read repeatedly to achieve data familiarisation. During this phase, all

data were anonymised, and participating teachers were assigned unique identification codes (e.g., T1, T2, T3, T8) to protect confidentiality and to enable clear attribution of illustrative quotations in the findings section.

Initial codes were generated inductively from the data, capturing recurring ideas related to pedagogical challenges, instructional practices, curriculum planning, and professional learning experiences in multigrade classrooms. These codes were then organised into broader themes, including challenges in multigrade teaching, pedagogical practices prior to the workshop, application of multigrade teaching strategies, and perceived changes in teachers' confidence and instructional competence.

The identified themes were reviewed, refined, and interpreted in relation to the study objectives and research questions to ensure internal coherence and analytical rigor. Triangulation across multiple data sources enhanced the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, allowing for a nuanced and contextually grounded understanding of teachers' experiences and reported learning gains following the intervention.

5. FINDINGS

The findings are presented according to four major themes that emerged from the thematic analysis of questionnaire responses, observations, practical activities, and reflective discussions. The findings indicate that teachers in multigrade junior primary classrooms in the Kunene Region experience interconnected pedagogical and systemic challenges that shape their daily instructional practices and professional experiences. Four overarching themes emerged from the data: (1) time management, workload, and curriculum demand; (2) limited learner support, classroom management, and cultural responsiveness; (3) inadequate resources, including teaching materials and ICT; and (4) insufficient professional training, institutional support, and networking opportunities.

Table 1: Themes and specific challenges emerging from the questionnaires

Overarching themes	Specific challenges
1. Time management, workload and curriculum demands	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulties giving equal attention to both grades and subjects within allocated time • Teaching two or more topics at once • Preparing for two or more grades in one lesson • Covering different topics at once
2. Limited learner support, classroom management, and cultural responsiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dealing with problematic children • Interruptions from learners • Challenges in supporting slow learners and providing individual needs • Managing two classes simultaneously • Overcrowded classrooms
3. Inadequate resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using teaching materials designed for mono-grades • Lack of ICT resources
4. Insufficient professional training, institutional support, and networking opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of professional development • Insufficient training from teacher training institutions • Schools located far from each other with no network connectivity

5.1 Time Management, Workload, and Curriculum Demands

Teachers identified **time management** as one of the most significant challenges in multigrade teaching. Participants reported that limited instructional time made it difficult to cover curriculum requirements for two or more grades simultaneously. Teaching learners at different developmental levels within the same lesson often resulted in rushed instruction and incomplete coverage of learning areas. One teacher explained: *“The time is never enough. You are teaching two or three grades, and each grade has its own syllabus, so something is always left out”* (T3). Participants further indicated that teaching all subjects as prescribed by the curriculum was unrealistic. As a result, teachers prioritised core subjects such as Literacy and Numeracy, while subjects like Art, Physical Education, and Religious and Moral Education were frequently neglected. Lesson planning for multigrade classrooms was described as particularly demanding and time-consuming, especially in the absence of clear guidance. A participant noted: *“Planning for multigrade is very difficult because you must combine lessons, but the manuals are not made for that”* (T1). The

heavy workload associated with planning, teaching, and assessing multiple grades intensified teachers' stress levels and limited opportunities for reflective practice and instructional innovation. Another teacher explained: *"You move from one grade to another the whole day, and by the end of the lesson some learners are still waiting for assistance"* (T6). One participant further stated: *"Most of the time we only finish the important subjects because there is not enough time for all learning areas"* (T8).

5.2 Learner Support, Classroom Management, and Cultural Responsiveness

Another dominant theme concerned **limited learner support**, compounded by classroom management challenges and cultural diversity. Teachers reported difficulty in providing individual attention to learners due to large class sizes and diverse learning needs. Learners requiring additional academic support were often disadvantaged, as teachers had to divide their attention across grades. One participant stated: *"Some learners need more help, but you cannot give them the time because the other grade is waiting"* (T4). Classroom management challenges further complicated teaching and learning processes. Managing disruptive or problematic behaviour consumed valuable lesson time and reduced instructional effectiveness. These challenges were particularly pronounced when pre-grade learners were integrated with Grade 1 and Grade 2 learners. Cultural responsiveness also emerged as a critical issue, especially in classrooms including learners from marginalised communities such as the Himba. Teachers reported difficulties in bridging cultural and linguistic differences, particularly when learners had limited exposure to formal schooling and the language of instruction. As one teacher observed: *"For some Himba learners, the school environment is very different from home, and this makes learning difficult for them"* (T5). These challenges affected learner participation and engagement, highlighting the need for culturally responsive teaching approaches tailored to local contexts. A participant explained: *"When the younger learners need attention, the older learners sometimes lose concentration and start talking"* (T6).

5.3 Inadequate Teaching Materials and ICT Resources

The third theme focused on **inadequate teaching and learning resources**, including limited access to ICT. Teachers consistently reported a shortage of materials suitable for multigrade classrooms. Most available teaching aids were designed for monograde teaching, forcing teachers

to improvise or reuse materials across grades. One participant explained: *“The materials we get are for one grade only, so in multigrade you have to struggle and improvise”* (T7). One participant further commented: *“We share the same materials for different grades, and sometimes there are not enough books or teaching aids for all learners”* (T3).

The lack of ICT resources further constrained instructional practices. Teachers cited poor network connectivity, lack of digital devices, and limited ICT skills as major barriers to integrating technology into teaching. As a result, opportunities for interactive and learner-centred instruction were limited, particularly in remote schools.

5.4 Limited Professional Training, Institutional Support, and Networking

The final theme relates to **insufficient professional preparation and support systems**. Participants reported that they had received little or no training specifically focused on multigrade teaching during pre-service or in-service programmes. Consequently, many teachers relied on personal experience and trial-and-error approaches. One teacher remarked: *“We were trained to teach one grade only. When you come to multigrade, you just learn as you go”* (T2). Additionally, another participant remarked: *“You learn multigrade teaching through experience because there is no proper training specifically for multigrade classrooms”* (T4).

Teachers also expressed concern about limited institutional support, including infrequent visits by advisory teachers and a lack of practical guidance on multigrade pedagogy. In addition, poor network communication in rural areas limited opportunities for professional collaboration and access to online resources. A participant noted: *“There is no network most of the time, so you feel isolated and cannot share ideas with other teachers”* (T8). Teachers also highlighted the importance of collaboration: *“If we had regular meetings with other multigrade teachers, we could learn better ways of teaching together”* (T6).

6. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that multigrade teaching in junior primary classrooms in the Kunene Region is shaped by a complex interplay of structural, pedagogical, and institutional challenges. These findings strongly align with the literature reviewed earlier, which conceptualises

multigrade teaching not merely as a classroom arrangement but as a context requiring specialised pedagogical knowledge, systemic alignment, and sustained professional support (Hyry-Beihammer & Hascher, 2021; Little, 2021). In this study, teachers' lived experiences confirm that while multigrade teaching ensures access to education in geographically remote areas, it simultaneously places significant demands on teachers that are not adequately supported by existing policy and practice frameworks.

One of the most prominent challenges identified is the difficulty of lesson planning across multiple grade levels. Teachers reported that designing lessons for pre-primary, Grade 1, and Grade 2 learners within a single classroom requires considerable time, effort, and cognitive flexibility. This finding is consistent with recent research indicating that multigrade lesson planning involves integrating multiple curricula, aligning learning outcomes, and differentiating instruction for learners at varying developmental stages (Kamal & Raza, 2022; Hyry-Beihammer & Hascher, 2021). In the Kunene context, this challenge is further intensified by the inclusion of pre-grade learners, whose developmental needs differ significantly from those of older learners. From a critical perspective, this challenge reflects a deeper structural issue—the misalignment between national curriculum frameworks and multigrade classroom realities. As highlighted in the literature review, curricula in many education systems, including Namibia, are designed primarily for monograde settings (UNESCO, 2023). The findings of this study therefore support the argument that difficulties in lesson planning are not simply a function of teacher competence but are rooted in systemic curriculum rigidity. This reinforces a shift away from deficit-oriented interpretations of teacher performance towards a more contextualised understanding of pedagogical challenges.

Closely related to lesson planning is the issue of time management. Teachers in this study reported that dividing instructional time across multiple grades often results in uneven attention to learners. Younger learners, particularly those in pre-primary and Grade 1, require continuous guidance, which limits the time available for older learners. This finding echoes broader research indicating that time allocation in multigrade classrooms is inherently complex and often leads to instructional imbalances (OECD, 2021). Importantly, this study extends existing literature by illustrating how time constraints intersect with classroom composition and learner diversity. In Kunene, where classrooms are characterised by wide variations in age, ability, and language proficiency, time management becomes not only a logistical challenge but also an equity issue. Learners who require

additional support may not receive adequate attention, thereby reinforcing existing learning disparities. This finding supports the argument that effective multigrade teaching requires not only pedagogical strategies but also structural adjustments, including reduced class sizes and additional teaching support (Veenman, 2022).

Another significant finding is the difficulty teachers experience in providing individualised support to learners in overcrowded and resource-constrained classrooms. While multigrade teaching has been associated with opportunities for peer learning and collaborative engagement, the findings suggest that such benefits are not easily realised in practice. Recent studies emphasise that the success of peer learning in multigrade settings depends on careful structuring and manageable class sizes (Little, 2021; Kamal & Raza, 2022). In the absence of these conditions, teachers struggle to create inclusive learning environments that cater to diverse learner needs.

The findings also highlight the marginalisation of non-core subjects such as Art, Physical Education, and Religious and Moral Education. Teachers reported prioritising Mathematics and English due to curriculum demands and assessment pressures. This aligns with existing research showing that in resource-constrained contexts, teachers often focus on examinable subjects at the expense of holistic education (Makuwa & Kapenda, 2022).

From an analytical standpoint, this pattern raises important questions about the broader aims of education in multigrade contexts. While prioritising core subjects may be a pragmatic response to systemic pressures, it undermines the holistic development of learners, particularly in early childhood education where play, creativity, and physical activity are essential for cognitive and socio-emotional development. This finding reinforces concerns that curriculum implementation in multigrade classrooms often becomes selective rather than comprehensive (UNESCO, 2023).

The lack of teaching and learning materials emerged as another critical challenge. Teachers reported relying heavily on improvised resources due to limited access to appropriate materials. While improvisation reflects teacher resilience and adaptability, it also highlights systemic inequities in resource distribution. Recent literature underscores that access to quality teaching materials is essential for effective instruction, particularly in multigrade settings where teachers must cater to diverse learning needs simultaneously (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). In this study,

the reliance on improvisation appears to be both a strength and a limitation. On the one hand, it demonstrates teachers' creativity and commitment to their learners. On the other hand, it places an additional burden on teachers and may result in inconsistencies in instructional quality. This finding supports the argument that sustainable improvement in multigrade education requires systemic investment in contextually relevant teaching resources rather than reliance on individual teacher effort.

The issue of institutional support further reinforces the structural nature of the challenges identified. Teachers reported limited access to professional development, mentoring, and supervisory support. This finding aligns with recent research highlighting the importance of continuous, context-specific professional development in improving teaching practices (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Mtetwa & Ndemo, 2022).

In the Kunene context, geographic isolation exacerbates professional isolation, limiting opportunities for collaboration and knowledge sharing. This study therefore supports the literature's emphasis on the need for decentralised and locally accessible professional development models. Importantly, teachers in this study articulated clear and practical support needs, including training on multigrade lesson planning, curriculum integration, and classroom management strategies. This suggests that teachers are not passive recipients of policy but active agents seeking to improve their practice when given appropriate support.

A particularly important contribution of this study is its insight into teachers' perceptions of multigrade teaching. While much of the literature focuses on structural challenges, this study highlights how these challenges are experienced and interpreted by teachers. The findings suggest that teachers' perceptions are shaped not only by classroom realities but also by the level of institutional support they receive. Where support is limited, multigrade teaching is perceived as burdensome and overwhelming. Conversely, the literature suggests that with adequate training and resources, teachers are more likely to view multigrade teaching as an opportunity for innovation (Hyry-Beihammer & Hascher, 2021).

This dual perspective-multigrade teaching as both a challenge and an opportunity-is central to understanding its role in rural education. The findings of this study reinforce the argument that the

effectiveness of multigrade teaching is not determined by classroom structure alone but by the extent to which it is supported by coherent policies, appropriate resources, and targeted professional development (Akyeampong, & Rolleston, 2013). Recent literature similarly argues that sustainable multigrade reform requires systemic recognition of rural schooling realities, including differentiated curriculum pacing, context-sensitive teacher education, and locally relevant pedagogical models (Ares-Ferreiros et al., 2025; UNESCO, 2023).

From a policy perspective, the findings call for a fundamental shift in how multigrade teaching is conceptualised within Namibia's education system. Rather than being treated as a temporary solution to teacher shortages, multigrade teaching should be recognised as a permanent and legitimate form of schooling in rural contexts. This requires the development of multigrade-specific curricula, assessment frameworks, and teacher training programmes.

Furthermore, the findings highlight the need for greater alignment between policy and practice. As noted in the literature review, misalignment between curriculum expectations and classroom realities is a major source of teacher frustration and inefficiency (UNESCO, 2023). Addressing this misalignment requires collaborative efforts between policymakers, curriculum developers, and teachers to design flexible and contextually relevant instructional frameworks (Berry, 2020).

Finally, this study contributes to the broader discourse on educational equity. By highlighting the challenges faced by teachers in remote and under-resourced contexts, it underscores the need for targeted interventions that address systemic inequalities. Ensuring that learners in multigrade classrooms receive quality education is not only a pedagogical issue but also a matter of social justice.

In conclusion, the findings of this study confirm and extend existing literature on multigrade teaching by providing context-specific insights from the Kunene Region. They demonstrate that while multigrade teaching plays a critical role in expanding access to education, its effectiveness is constrained by systemic, pedagogical, and institutional factors. At the same time, the study highlights teachers' resilience, adaptability, and willingness to improve their practice. Addressing the challenges identified requires a holistic approach that combines policy reform, professional development, and resource provision. With appropriate support, multigrade classrooms have the

potential to become inclusive and effective learning environments that promote equitable educational outcomes for all learners.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are proposed to strengthen the effectiveness of multigrade teaching in rural junior primary schools. First, targeted professional development programmes focusing specifically on multigrade pedagogy should be institutionalised. Such programmes should emphasise curriculum integration, differentiated instruction, classroom management, and assessment strategies suitable for multigrade contexts. Second, curriculum planners should consider adapting syllabi, planning manuals, and assessment tools to better accommodate multigrade classrooms, particularly in the junior primary phase. Third, improved provision of teaching and learning materials designed for multigrade use is essential, alongside increased access to ICT infrastructure and connectivity in remote schools. Finally, institutional support structures should be strengthened through regular advisory visits, professional learning communities, and networking opportunities to reduce teacher isolation and promote the sharing of effective practices.

8. CONTRIBUTION OF THE STUDY

This study makes several important contributions to the field of multigrade education, particularly within the context of Namibia and similar rural, resource-constrained settings.

First, the study contributes context-specific empirical evidence on multigrade teaching in the Kunene Region, an area that remains under-researched despite the widespread prevalence of multigrade classrooms. By foregrounding teachers' lived experiences, the study addresses a critical gap in the literature, which has largely focused on global or policy-level analyses with limited attention to local classroom realities. The findings provide nuanced insights into how structural conditions—such as staffing norms, geographic isolation, and resource limitations—shape pedagogical practices in junior primary classrooms.

Second, the study advances understanding of the pedagogical complexities of multigrade teaching, particularly in early-grade contexts. It highlights how teachers navigate lesson planning, time management, curriculum integration, and learner diversity within a single classroom. Importantly,

the study shifts the discourse away from deficit perspectives of teacher capability by demonstrating that many of the challenges encountered are rooted in systemic misalignments between curriculum expectations and multigrade realities. This contribution is significant in reframing multigrade teaching as a structural and policy issue rather than solely a pedagogical limitation.

Third, the study contributes to curriculum and assessment discourse by providing evidence of how national curriculum frameworks are interpreted and adapted in multigrade settings. The findings reveal patterns of selective curriculum implementation, particularly the prioritisation of core subjects at the expense of non-core areas. This insight has implications for curriculum design, suggesting the need for more flexible, integrated, and context-responsive frameworks that support holistic learning in multigrade classrooms.

Fourth, the study offers practical contributions to teacher professional development by identifying specific support needs articulated by teachers themselves. These include training in multigrade lesson planning, strategies for managing diverse learner needs, and approaches to integrating multiple grade-level curricula. By grounding these recommendations in empirical data, the study provides a foundation for designing targeted, contextually relevant professional development programmes that move beyond generic training models.

Fifth, the study contributes to education policy and practice by highlighting the need to reconceptualise multigrade teaching as a permanent and legitimate feature of rural education systems rather than a temporary response to resource constraints. The findings support the argument for policy reforms that include multigrade-specific teacher training, curriculum adaptation, improved resource allocation, and strengthened institutional support mechanisms.

Finally, the study contributes to the broader discourse on equity and inclusion in education. By documenting the challenges faced in remote and marginalised contexts such as Kunene, it underscores the importance of targeted interventions to ensure that learners in multigrade classrooms receive quality education comparable to their peers in monograde settings. In doing so, the study aligns with national and global priorities of promoting equitable access to meaningful and inclusive education.

Overall, this study provides a comprehensive, contextually grounded understanding of multigrade teaching in Namibia and offers actionable insights for researchers, policymakers, and practitioners seeking to improve educational quality in rural and underserved communities.

9. CONCLUSION

This study investigated the pedagogical challenges experienced by Junior Primary teachers in multigrade classrooms in the Kunene Region of Namibia. The findings underscore that while multigrade teaching plays a critical role in ensuring access to education in sparsely populated and rural contexts, its implementation is accompanied by substantial instructional and systemic constraints that compromise teaching effectiveness and learner outcomes. The study reveals that multigrade teachers face persistent challenges related to time management, lesson planning across multiple grades, and the provision of individual learner support. These difficulties are intensified by the integration of pre-grade learners with Grades 1 and 2, large class sizes, and the obligation to teach several subjects simultaneously. As a result, non-core subjects such as Art, Physical Education, and Religious and Moral Education are often neglected, narrowing learners' holistic educational experiences. Inadequate teaching and learning materials, misalignment between curriculum documents and multigrade realities, and the absence of multigrade-specific assessment tools further constrain pedagogical practice. The findings also highlight limited institutional support and insufficient professional development opportunities tailored to multigrade contexts. Consequently, teachers rely heavily on improvisation and individual coping strategies rather than structured pedagogical guidance.

The study concludes that multigrade teaching in the Kunene Region remains largely under-supported despite its prevalence and strategic importance. Without targeted policy interventions, context-responsive teacher training, and curriculum adaptation, learners in multigrade classrooms risk continued educational disadvantage. The study recommends strengthening pre-service and in-service teacher preparation for multigrade pedagogy, revising curriculum and assessment frameworks to reflect multigrade realities, and improving resource provision and institutional support. Addressing these issues is essential for enhancing instructional quality and promoting educational equity in rural Namibian schools.

10. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to acknowledge the junior primary teachers in the Kunene Region who generously shared their experiences and participated in this study. Their insights and reflections were central to the success of the research. Appreciation is also extended to the regional education authorities for granting permission to conduct the study and for their logistical support during data collection.

10.1 Funding Information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

10.2 Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are not publicly available due to ethical considerations and the need to protect the confidentiality of participants. Anonymised data may be made available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request and subject to ethical approval.

10.3 Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

10.4 Ethical Considerations

Permission to conduct the research was granted by the Ministry of Education, Arts & Culture, Kunene Directorate of Education. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and anonymity and confidentiality were ensured using participant codes (e.g., T1, T2).

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