Book review: Cornish, L., & Taole, J.M. (2021). Perspectives on Multigrade Teaching: Research and Practice in South Africa and Australia. Springer

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Multigrade Teaching: South African and Australian Perspectives

The significance of book reviews lies in at least two areas. Besides providing a concise summary of the discourses and facts presented in the book, they offer both the authors and readers a valued critique. The book under review purported to explore multigrade teaching in contrasted resource-deprived (South Africa) and resource-rich/abundant (Australia) contexts. Bannister-Tyrrell and Pringle (2021) provide a helpful clarification of the concepts associated with multigrade classrooms which, if not properly dissected, may lead to confusion (see chapter 10). In addition, the authors (Bannister-Tyrrell and Pringle, 2021) -argue that making sense of multigrade classrooms relies on the "*reflective rationale used to form the class*" (p. 185). For example, *multiage* classes are formed by choice because of a belief in the value of learning with younger and older peers (Bannister-Tyrrell and Pringle, 2021, p. 185). On the contrary, *multigrade* classes are formed through necessity (Cornish, 2013), mostly in rural areas where acute shortages of teachers and learners are common. Due to the earlier contextual elucidation, Australia, with its plentiful resources, is more likely to be spoiled for choice and resultantly have more multiage classes than multigrade classes which South Africa is associated with.

Similar disparities between multigrade schools in Australia and South Africa are noted in respect of access to information and communications technology (ICT) as well as internet connectivity (Department of Basic Education, 2013; du Plessis & Subramanien, 2021) which is problematic in the latter. Whilst it may be conceded that exposure to and availing ICT tools may not necessarily lead to increased uptake, strides at making teaching in multigrade South African classrooms is reportedly, made bearable by the South African teacher laptop initiative (Mahlong, 2009). The one-laptop initiative in South Africa, was an attempt to introduce ICTs to multigrade teachers, including the internet and software such as Microsoft Office (du Plessis & Subramanien, 2021, p. 215). Contained in chapter 11 (last chapter of the book), the narrative of introducing ICTs in multigrade classrooms is commendable in that it inspires traversing the fourth industrial revolution spaces concomitant with current development trajectories. However, the use of dated literature might have missed out on current discourses.

This book identifies 'isolation' as a major issue particularly in developing countries, brought about by the United Nations call for universal primary education (United Nations, 2015a, b; Cornish, 2021). Mostly and through deficit lenses, different chapters lament the ubiquitous lack of resources and portray multigrade classrooms as subjects of profound marginalisation and disadvantage. Most importantly, suggested relief is thought of [consistent with deficit thinking] as emanating from elsewhere [mostly from the government]. Therefore, what is called the locus of control is perceived to be from 'out there'. In such situations, local communities miss the opportunity to discover, map and mobilise local assets with a view to finding local solutions. For

example, mention is made of teachers not receiving support (Cornish, 2021, p. 15; du Plessis & Subramanien, 2021, p. 119).

Some strategies for dealing with the 'daunting task' of teaching in multigrade classrooms were suggested. Van Wyk (2021) proposed the use cooperative learning [emphasising teamwork amongst learners], Taole and Cornish (2021) addressed the challenge of isolation through communities of practice and further, Taole (2021) dealt with assessments. It was further encouraging to note theoretical framing which adopted critical and capabilities theories. These two theoretical lenses complement each other. Whilst the former seeks to challenge the status quo and advocates for change, the latter inherent assets/capacities that are often overlooked in finding local solutions (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007). My reflection on these suggested strategies is that they are valued owing to the fact that they might have worked elsewhere. We therefore need to look deeper into the phenomenon of locally or home-brewed strategies.

This book does not contain a concluding chapter. Concluding chapters provide scope for a holistic reflection, are known for synthesizing main points of a book and most importantly, illuminating issues that stood out in the discourses and signal those that need further attention. The editors may have partly addressed the concern in chapter 1 (par. 1.4, Conclusion) even though the section creates an impression that it was a conclusion of chapter 1 and not the entire book.

In conclusion, a point has been made that multigrade classrooms remain a persistent feature of the educational endeavour. This book provides a valuable resource for teachers, governments and communities.

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