

Educator Resilience in Multigrade Rural Farm Schools in KwaZulu-Natal: An Exploratory Case Study

Deborah Catherine Lees^{1*} 

Jacomina Mokgadi Motitswe² 

Matshidiso Joyce Taole³ 

Fulufhelo Mukhathi⁴ 

AFFILIATIONS

^{1,2,3&4}College of Education, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa.

CORRESPONDENCE

Email: leesdc@unisa.ac.za*

EDITORIAL DATES

Received: 18 February 2026

Revised: 24 April 2026

Accepted: 15 May 2026

Published: 29 May 2026

Copyright:

© The Author(s) 2026.

Published by [ERRCD Forum](#).

This is an open access article distributed under Creative Commons Attribution ([CC BY 4.0](#)) licence.



DOI: [10.38140/ijrcs-2026.vol8.1.05](https://doi.org/10.38140/ijrcs-2026.vol8.1.05)

Abstract: Educator resilience in teaching at multigrade rural schools in South Africa remains an underexplored area of research, particularly concerning the understanding of how educators develop and sustain collaborative practices to navigate contextual and systemic constraints in multigrade settings. The purpose of this study was to investigate how primary school multigrade educators in rural farm schools in uPhongolo, KwaZulu-Natal, cultivate and maintain resilience in challenging rural environments. A qualitative exploratory case study design was employed, involving 18 multigrade educators selected through purposive sampling. Semi-structured, open-ended interviews were conducted to elicit educators' lived experiences. Guided by Lave and Wenger's Community of Practice theoretical framework, a thematic analysis revealed that educator resilience is harnessed and developed through collaboration with peers and professional networks, the creation of shared repertoires for teaching and instructional routines, navigating curriculum changes collectively, and providing and receiving emotional support during periods of burnout and stress. The findings position resilience as a socially constructed process that emerges within educators' professional communities in this context.

This study contributes to the understanding of how collaborative practices enhance educator resilience in under-resourced settings, with implications for educational policy and educator development initiatives. Policies that promote school-based professional learning communities, mentoring, and peer support structures could play a crucial role in strengthening educators' resilience in rural multigrade contexts.

Keywords: Communities of practice, educator, multigrade teaching, qualitative, resilience, rural farm schools.

1. Introduction

Multigrade teaching is a pedagogical approach whereby a single educator concurrently instructs learners from two or more grade levels within the same classroom (Msimanga, 2020). In the South African context, the term 'educator' refers to an individual who teaches, trains, or provides professional educational services to others (Department of Basic Education, 2022, p. 5). This approach accommodates learners of differing ages, abilities, and academic readiness levels, thus fostering a heterogeneous learning environment that is distinctly different from traditional monograde classrooms (Karaçoban & Karakuş, 2022). Scholars such as Naparan and Castañeda (2021) and Taole (2024) assert that multigrade teaching is not merely an instructional preference; it is often a contextual necessity arising from low student enrolment, educator shortages, and demographic or geographic constraints, which are particularly pronounced in rural and sparsely populated regions.

In South Africa, especially in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), multigrade classrooms are common in rural and agricultural areas where learner enrolments are low, educator shortages are prevalent, and infrastructure is inadequate (Dladla, 2020; KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education, 2022). Teaching

How to cite this article:

Lees, D. C., Motitswe, J. M., Taole, M. J., & Mukhathi, F. (2026). Educator resilience in multigrade rural farm schools in KwaZulu-Natal: An exploratory case study. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Rural and Community Studies*, 8(1), a05. <https://doi.org/10.38140/ijrcs-2026.vol8.1.05>

in multigrade classrooms presents intricate pedagogical, organisational, and psychological demands. Educators in these environments frequently manage learners across various grades, abilities, and curricula within the same space, often with limited professional development support, insufficient stakeholder engagement, inadequate teaching and learning resources, or a lack of policy guidance specifically tailored to multigrade contexts (Blease & Condy, 2015; Courtney, 2024). These multifaceted teaching demands not only impact the quality of education but also pose significant challenges to educators' well-being and sustainability in the profession. Such challenges encompass inadequate training, insufficient stakeholder support, and limited school resources (Ramathan & Ngubane, 2013). Furthermore, Naparan and Castañeda (2021) indicate that multigrade educators experience burnout due to insufficient time to manage their classes, difficulties in travelling to schools, and the stress associated with their working environments. These challenges are often exacerbated by poor physical conditions of classrooms and school buildings; miscommunication with parents stemming from illiteracy, language, and cultural barriers; as well as issues of poverty, learner absenteeism, and obstacles in the teaching and learning process.

The schools in which educators teach learners in multigrade settings are situated in the uPhongolo sub-district within the broader Zululand Magisterial District. Approximately 35% of the sub-district's residents are under the age of 15 (Statistics South Africa, 2022). Among the population aged 20 and above, 14% have received no formal schooling, 38% have completed their full schooling, and only 6% (uPhongolo Local Municipality, 2026) have attained higher education qualifications, illustrating the limited opportunities and access to university for the majority of young people. IsiZulu is the predominant language spoken in the sub-district. In terms of socio-economic status, 49.1% of the population utilise pit toilets, 13.43% are formally employed, and the majority of households earn less than ZAR2,400 per month or have no income at all (uPhongolo Local Municipality, 2026). In this impoverished district of KZN, the parents of schoolchildren attending the identified rural and farm schools are predominantly unemployed or employed as farm labourers for agricultural owners.

1.1 Problem statement

Whereas international studies have explored educator resilience in urban, township, and both in-service and pre-service contexts (Mansfield, Beltman, Broadley & Weatherby-Fell, 2016), South African studies have predominantly focused on educator efficacy among pre-service and in-service educator education, alongside the development of educator resilience in challenging contexts (Dladla, 2020; Jonker, Graham & Ebersöhn, 2025; Versfeld, Ebersöhn, Ferreira & Graham, 2025). Consequently, there remains a paucity of empirical studies addressing resilience in multigrade classrooms within rural South Africa, particularly in rural farming areas.

In these settings, educators confront numerous challenges related to pedagogy, social issues, and economic hardships. This study aims to bridge this gap by investigating educator resilience in multigrade classrooms in the Zululand Magisterial District of KwaZulu-Natal through an exploratory case study. It examines the challenges that educators encounter, the resources they utilise, and the strategies they develop to sustain their professional and personal well-being through resilience. Ultimately, the study seeks to provide insights that can enhance educator education, inform policy, and improve school leadership practices, thereby fortifying educator resilience in marginalised educational contexts.

To address this issue, the following research question was formulated to guide the study: How do educators develop and maintain resilience while teaching in multigrade classrooms in resource-constrained rural farm schools in KwaZulu-Natal? The objective of the study was to explore how educators in rural, farm-school multigrade classrooms in KwaZulu-Natal develop and maintain resilience in their daily work. This objective sought to interpret educators' daily practices through Lave and Wenger's (1991) and Wenger's (1998) Community of Practice (CoP) framework to understand how their social participation fosters resilience in their daily work.

2. Literature Review

Multigrade teaching is a widely adopted practice, particularly in developing countries, aimed at enhancing access to basic education for disadvantaged learners, especially those in rural and agricultural areas (Barbetta, Sorrenti & Turati, 2021; Blease & Condy, 2015). The concept of multigrade teaching is prevalent in rural and resource-constrained contexts, where it was established to meet the internationally mandated 'Education for All' targets and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (Kivunja & Sims, 2015; UNESCO, 2020). These goals aim to ensure that all children, particularly those often overlooked by the education system, have access to and can complete high-quality, free, and compulsory basic education (Kivunja & Sims, 2015; UNESCO, 2020).

Ruelan and Ebisa (2025) note that multigrade teaching is commonly practised in rural and remote regions worldwide, especially in developing countries, where limited resources and low student numbers necessitate the combination of multiple grade levels within a single classroom. In Iran, approximately one million children are instructed in multigrade classrooms (Meshkinfam, Khosravi, Abbasi Sarvak & Poushaneh, 2023). In the Philippines, multigrade education has been institutionalised as a strategy to ensure equitable learning opportunities, particularly in geographically isolated and disadvantaged schools (Ruelan & Ebisa, 2025). Many Turkish educators operate in multigrade classrooms, where they must manage teaching and administration, as well as engage in school maintenance (Kalender & Erdem, 2021).

In South Africa, policy and curriculum development, as well as pre-service educator training, have historically prioritised traditional monograde teaching. Educators teaching in multigrade classrooms are often compelled to adapt monograde curricula for diverse ability groups without sufficient guidance, thereby increasing their workload related to lesson planning, content delivery, and assessment (Qangule & Letuma, 2025; Taole, 2024). Qangule and Letuma (2025) argue that behavioural management also presents a significant challenge for educators in multigrade classrooms. This difficulty arises from insufficient policy guidelines and inadequate educator preparation for teaching in multigrade settings. These authors emphasise that if educators fail to employ differentiated pedagogical and behavioural strategies to meet the diverse learning needs in multigrade environments, classroom disruptions are likely to occur. Consequently, educators are compelled to devote much of their attention to managing behaviours rather than facilitating effective learning.

Research has demonstrated that, despite its significance, multigrade teaching encounters numerous challenges, particularly in the implementation of strategies designed to address diverse learning needs within a single classroom (Msimanga, 2020; Qangule & Letuma, 2025; Ruelan & Ebisa, 2025). Certain systemic challenges arise from insufficient pre-service preparation, inflexible curricula, and limited institutional support (Idris, 2020; Recla & Potane, 2024). Additionally, educators in multigrade classrooms frequently contend with restricted resource availability, particularly in rural and underserved areas. Mpahla and Makena (2021) argue that although the Department of Basic Education has developed guidelines, such as the 'Multi-Grade Strategy' and the 'Basic Education Sector Plan: Strengthening the Provision of Quality Teaching and Learning in Multi-Grade Schools', to enhance educators' capabilities in creating instructional plans tailored to the specific needs of multigrade classrooms, the commitment to improving the professional skills of multigrade educators remains largely theoretical. Furthermore, both Mpahla and Makena (2021) and Qangule and Letuma (2025) emphasise that the existing curriculum is predominantly designed for monograde teaching, necessitating that multigrade educators make substantial adjustments to adapt it. Additionally, Mpahla and Makena (2021) and Taole (2024) underscore significant shortages of textbooks, a print-rich environment, budget constraints, limited basic teaching and learning resources, and inadequate educator training in multigrade pedagogy as factors hindering effective curriculum implementation and learner engagement.

Further challenges in multigrade teaching and learning encompass a lack of parental interest in their children's education, infrastructure issues, inadequate classroom space, overcrowded conditions, insufficient sanitation, minimal administrative support, and deteriorating buildings. These factors impose additional strain on educators, obstructing effective teaching and learning (Recla & Potane, 2024; Ruelan & Ebisa, 2025; Taole, 2024). Many principals, who serve as school leaders, are also tasked with teaching multigrade classes (Taole et al., 2024). These principals typically occupy diverse roles and responsibilities and are expected to perform various duties within the school context. They act as school leaders, serve as role models, and fulfil teaching responsibilities with little or no support (Parson et al., 2016; Ruelan & Ebisa, 2025; Taole et al., 2024).

2.1 Educator resilience in teaching multigrade classrooms

Despite the challenges encountered by multigrade educators, they employ coping strategies to optimise their efforts in developing students' abilities and skills while also providing essential support (Naparang & Alinsug, 2021). Resilience in teaching has emerged as a crucial focus area, particularly in the context of the challenges educators face, especially in resource-constrained and rural environments (Beltman, Dobson, Mansfield & Jay, 2020; Mansfield et al., 2016). It refers to educators' capacity to adapt, endure, and thrive despite adversity. Resilience in teaching contexts extends beyond individual coping mechanisms; it encompasses relational, organisational, and systemic supports that enable educators to sustain motivation, maintain their professional identity, and deliver meaningful learning experiences (Schlebusch, Schlebusch & Matjeane, 2023; Versfeld et al., 2025).

Recent studies in South Africa have investigated educator resilience among pre-service educators (Jonker et al., 2025), in township primary schools (Schlebusch et al., 2023), and in resource-constrained contexts where social connectedness emerges as a critical protective factor (Versfeld et al., 2025). However, there is a paucity of research specifically addressing resilience in multigrade classrooms in rural KwaZulu-Natal. Given the significance of educator well-being and sustained effectiveness in achieving educational equity and quality, understanding resilience in these challenging teaching contexts is imperative (Jonker et al., 2025; Schlebusch et al., 2023). This need is aligned with South African policy imperatives that underscore redress and targeted support for historically disadvantaged schools.

Educator resilience has been examined across various South African settings, with key components including self-efficacy, professional identity, coping strategies, social support, emotional well-being, motivation, and the capacity to adapt to adversity. For example, Jonker et al. (2025) identified strong correlations between self-efficacy and educator efficacy among pre-service educators, indicating that these are intrapersonal factors that facilitate resilience. In resource-constrained settings, social connectedness has been demonstrated to enhance resilience by improving emotional well-being, fostering peer collaboration, and sustaining commitment even amidst structural challenges (Versfeld et al., 2025).

Resilience in teaching is thus a dynamic process through which educators adapt to, withstand, and often grow from professional challenges (Mansfield et al., 2016). Protective factors include intrapersonal qualities such as self-efficacy, motivation, and identity (Jonker et al., 2025), as well as interpersonal and systemic supports including collegial networks, peer collaboration, school leadership, and supportive policy environments (Schlebusch et al., 2023; Versfeld et al., 2025). South African studies have illustrated that resilience is fortified by social connections and collective coping, particularly in resource-constrained environments (Du Plessis & Subramanien, 2014; Tredoux, 2020; Versfeld et al., 2025). Nevertheless, findings also highlight persistent gaps in institutional support and policy responses that necessitate educators' heavy reliance on personal coping mechanisms (Schlebusch et al., 2023).

The literature indicates that limited attention has been afforded to educators' resilience within rural, multigrade classrooms in South Africa. Educators in these contexts face multiple demands, such as teaching several grades simultaneously, differentiating curricula for various grades daily, experiencing minimal support for teaching, and managing multigrade learners with diverse learning needs in the face of scarce teaching resources. This underscores the necessity for context-specific research to explore how educator resilience is developed and sustained in rural, resource-constrained settings.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study was underpinned by the Community of Practice (CoP) Framework (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). A CoP is a group of people who share a common concern, interest, or profession, improving their practice through ongoing interaction and collaboration. This framework posits that learning is social in nature and that knowledge is developed through informal or formal participation, dialogue, and shared experiences, rather than in isolation (Wenger, 1998). A CoP is characterised by three distinct features: members share an area of interest; they are part of a community where relationships are established, and learning occurs; and they engage in a shared practice involving common tools, routines, experiences, and problem-solving strategies (Wenger, 1998). In this study, educators at rural, multigrade schools form a CoP to collaborate in addressing shared contextual teaching challenges.

In the context of multigrade classrooms in rural KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, where educators frequently encounter isolation, limited resources, and complex teaching demands (Maharaj & Chauke, 2025; Taole, 2018; Zulu & Mukeredzi, 2021), CoPs provide a valuable lens for understanding how educators develop and sustain resilience (Leahy et al., 2025; Mead et al., 2021). By conceptualising multigrade educators as members of informal or formal CoPs, this study explored how they utilise shared knowledge, collective experience, and peer support to navigate professional challenges.

The theory of Community of Practice is particularly pertinent to educator resilience in multigrade contexts, where educators often rely on collaboration, storytelling, and situated learning to adapt, cope, and thrive (Msimanga, 2019). The framework facilitates an examination of how resilience is not solely an individual attribute but a socially constructed, contextually grounded process that evolves through participation in relevant communities (Ebersöhn, 2014). Furthermore, CoP theory underscores how educators cultivate resilience through their involvement in professional networks and collaborative relationships. For instance, opportunities for mentorship, shared problem-solving, peer observation, and joint planning can enhance educators' sense of competence, belonging, and professional identity, which are critical components of intrapersonal resilience (Jonker et al., 2025). Additionally, the collaborative development of teaching strategies, coping mechanisms, and emotional support systems aligns with findings that social connectedness serves as a crucial protective factor in resource-constrained schools.

4. Methodology

The justification for this qualitative, exploratory case study lies in the necessity to acquire in-depth, contextualized understandings of how primary school multigrade educators in a rural setting develop and sustain resilience within their communities of practice (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2020). Specifically, the study aimed to elucidate educators' lived experiences and socially constructed perceptions of resilience within their school contexts, rather than to collect quantitative data (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The exploratory case study design was selected as it enabled a thorough investigation of a specific context—multigrade primary school educators in a rural environment—where the construct of educator resilience is context-dependent and underexplored (Yin, 2018; Stake, 1995). This design facilitated rich, contextual insights into how

educator resilience is developed and maintained in multigrade classrooms within resource-constrained rural farm schools in KZN.

The study received review and approval from the Research Permission Sub-Committee (RPSC) of the Senate Research, Innovation, Postgraduate Degrees, and Commercialisation Committee (SRIPCC) at the University of South Africa (ethical clearance: 2020 RPSC 036). The sample comprised eighteen educators from nine rural schools in the UPhongola region. All educators, including some who held principal positions, were female. Each educator provided informed consent to participate in the study. Participants were selected using non-probability convenience sampling due to the small, niche nature of primary school multigrade educators. This sampling method enabled the researchers to engage a sufficient number of participants and allowed for collaboration with educators as key informants who were readily available and willing to partake in semi-structured, open-ended interviews (Vehovar, Toepol & Steinmetz, 2016). The multigrade teaching experience of the selected educators varied from a few months to 15 years. Data collection occurred over a week in 2024. Participants had the opportunity to validate the study's findings in focus groups conducted with them in 2025, thereby enhancing the credibility of the coding process (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011).

Collaborative manual coding (Saldaña, 2021) was employed by the researchers, ensuring intercoder reliability through continuous member checking (Hamilton, 2020). Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2021) was utilised to analyse the semi-structured, open-ended interviews. Confidentiality and anonymity were upheld by anonymising participants' identities prior to data processing and employing pseudonyms (e.g., P1, P2, P3, etc.) to report the data. Educators were afforded the option to withdraw from the study at any point.

5. Presentation of Findings

Educators were interviewed to investigate their resilience in teaching multigrade classes within resource-constrained rural and farm school contexts in KZN. Four themes emerged from the semi-structured interview data gathered from educators regarding their experiences in multigrade settings. These themes encompass collaboration with peers and professional networks, the development of shared tools and routines, the collective navigation of curriculum changes, and mutual support in managing burnout and stress. Each theme is delineated below and substantiated by selected participant responses, which were coded as outlined in Section 3.

5.1 Theme 1: Collaboration with peers and professional networks

Resilience was cultivated among educators through peer collaboration and professional networks. Educators extensively discussed the support they received from colleagues within their own institutions, as well as from educators at adjacent schools and from stakeholders within the Department of Education, including the Circuit Manager and Subject Advisors. For example, P1 felt less alienated and supported with the help of others: *"I can say that the support I get here in school from other colleagues. We plan together. I'm not doing it alone..."* P14 reiterated that consulting with peers enhanced her confidence when navigating multigrade challenges: *"The school assisted me with seating arrangements for the multigrade classroom. Every year, we hold workshops at the school where we share problems and brainstorm strategies to tackle identified problems"*. Aligned with P14, P6 alluded to the spirit of collegiality of the Circuit Manager and was grateful to her as she was *"...always there to assist and regularly check our Annual Teaching Plans to ensure that we are in line with the CAPS requirements"*. P11 and P2 felt close to and easily connected to their Subject Advisor: *"...able to liaise and communicate with the District Subject Advisor via WhatsApp to seek any clarity regarding multigrade teaching. She has organized a Cluster where a number of neighboring schools meet as multigrade schools"*. P17, a new educator at a multigrade school, felt continually supported: *"...as a new educator, the senior educator assists me whenever I need to be helped."*

5.2 Theme 2: Shared repertoires for teaching and teaching routines

The data revealed educators' ability to collaboratively create shared tools, routines, and adaptive practices to manage the complex demands of teaching in their multigrade classrooms. They described how they relied on their collective resourcefulness to design and share timetables, lesson plans, and classroom management strategies that suited their daily classroom teaching. P4 explained that *"We create our own timetable. Maybe it means English, you teach IsiZulu, and then the other subject next."* They frequently emphasized the importance of collaboratively combining similar topics and sharing them with one another for teaching across multiple grades, thereby streamlining content delivery and ensuring continuity in learning. P1 informed, *"Sometimes we combine topics if they have similarities across grades. You just differentiate activities..."* P6 shared evidence of a collaborative approach as educators co-developed lesson plans and worksheets: *"When it comes to planning, sometimes we combine lesson plans and worksheets with colleagues who teach the same subjects."*

Beyond formal materials, educators developed informal routines to enhance their classroom management strategies. Grouping learners by ability rather than grade enabled them to manage their time more effectively and develop engagement across diverse levels. For example, P7 offered, *"We share informal strategies to group learners, like using ability instead of grade to make it easier to manage time and content."* P2 affirmed, *"We always share ideas and also help each other when we struggle to cope with certain learners in different grades."*

Participants' capacity to create shared repertoires for teaching and teaching routines was not only a practical response to their resource limitations but also a demonstration of professional resilience. By co-constructing teaching routines and materials, they transformed everyday challenges into opportunities for innovation and mutual learning, thereby reinforcing resilience as a socially co-constructed process within their professional community.

5.3 Theme 3: Navigating curriculum changes together

It was evident that teaching in multigrade classrooms presented educators with ongoing curriculum-related challenges that exhausted their time, energy, and confidence. Many participants explained that managing different grade levels in the same classroom made it almost impossible to complete lessons within the allotted time. As P4 stated, *"The challenging thing is time because you cannot finish your activities on time."* Others noted that the CAPS (Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements) was not designed for multigrade settings and provided little practical guidance for adapting lessons across grade levels. As P8 explained, *"The curriculum is not friendly to multigrade teaching. We try to adapt, but there's no formal training for that."*

Despite these difficulties, educators demonstrated resilience by adapting and supporting one another. Educators shared approaches to integrating subjects by simplifying content and connecting and combining common activities across grades. P9 described this process as *"trial and error,"* explaining that they *"share methods on how to teach numeracy across multiple grades at once."*

Professional resilience emerged through networking and collaboration. The majority of educators sought help from peers in neighbouring schools or relied on district workshops to guide their curriculum planning. For example, P12 reflected, *"I visit neighboring schools to find out everything I need. They share documents with me, and we communicate regularly. The subject advisors share their contact information with us, and they appreciate it if we communicate with them."* This was echoed by P18, who said, *"I am mostly helped by the workshops held by the circuit office, but most of the assistance is from other schools' educators through networking."* Furthermore, P3 iterated, *"We interpret and filter content for relevance by ourselves,"* while P7 added, *"You just move slowly and check with other educators because you have to accommodate each grade's pace."*

These collective efforts illustrate how educators actively utilise professional relationships and share knowledge to confront curriculum challenges. Through collaboration, peer networking, and informal learning, educators develop the capacity to adapt and sustain their teaching in the face of contextual systemic barriers.

5.4 Theme 4: Support during burnout or stress

The participants in the study reported high levels of exhaustion and emotional strain associated with multigrade teaching. Many expressed feeling overwhelmed by the multiple roles they perform daily. As one educator stated, *"We are too tired. It's not easy to teach all grades alone. At times, I feel like giving up."* (P10). These pressures were compounded by limited resources and unrealistic expectations. Participants spoke about struggling with insufficient budgets and inadequate district support: *"Budgeting means pressure; we do not get allocated enough money. I overcome this by seeking advice from other principals and finding cheaper ways and cheaper providers to get things done."* (P9).

Despite these challenges, educators demonstrated remarkable persistence and adaptability, drawing resilience from multiple sources. For instance, one educator recounted how an encouraging conversation reframed her former negative perspective: *"At first, I thought I was being cursed, but our subject advisor said we are not cursed; she said that I have a job. Many around us do not have jobs."* (P17).

Educators also relied on support from peer and community networks to minimize stress and burnout. For example, P12 noted that *"Retired principals in the area sometimes become pastors – they counsel us informally."* P9 commented on social activities arranged for them through the circuit office and through their unions: *"Through circulars and WhatsApp groups, our unions organize activities such as sports days, reduced rates on vacations, and Women's Day celebrations."*

The educators also cultivated inner resilience through optimism, humor, and self-care. P10 explained, *"I stay light-hearted, yet I stay serious about my work... we all belong to non-viable schools, yet we must perform, and we do."* Compassionate acts, beyond the call of duty, developed resilience for P9: *"Learners do not have jerseys in winter; they are cold, and it is stressful: I take clothes from my family for them."*

6. Discussion of Findings

The discussion of findings integrates the study's results with the theoretical framework and relevant literature. The study explored how educators teaching in multigrade classrooms in rural farm schools in uPhongolo, KZN, develop and sustain resilience in resource-constrained contexts. Guided by Lave and Wenger's (1991) Community of Practice (CoP) framework, the findings demonstrate that resilience is not merely an individual attribute; rather, it is a socially constructed process woven into educators' everyday professional interactions. The discussion highlights how collaboration with peers and professional networks, the development of shared repertoires for teaching and teaching routines, collective navigation of curriculum challenges, and support during periods of burnout or stress contribute to the development and maintenance of educators' resilience. These findings contribute to research on educator resilience by underscoring the importance of CoPs in supporting educators who operate in such contexts (Mansfield et al., 2016; Schlebusch et al., 2023; Versfeld et al., 2025).

The first finding indicates that collaboration with peers and engagement in professional networks are essential for fostering educator resilience in rural multigrade classrooms. Educators' mutual engagement with colleagues within their schools, at neighbouring schools, and with district officials is central to CoPs (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Such collaborative engagement reduces professional isolation, which is an ongoing challenge in rural and multigrade contexts (Blease & Condy, 2015; Taole, 2024), and enhances educators' confidence and sense of belonging. Their practices illustrate the development of a shared repertoire within the teaching community, a key element of Lave and

Wenger's (1991) CoP framework. Through ongoing collaboration and reflection, educators collectively work together to make their teaching more manageable. Consistent with South African resilience literature, social connectedness assists multigrade educators in coping with teaching complexities and systemic constraints (Schlebusch et al., 2023; Versfeld et al., 2025). Support from circuit managers and subject advisors bolstered educators' professional identity and efficacy, reinforcing Jonker et al.'s (2025) argument that resilience is closely linked to experiences of collective competence and professional affirmation.

The second finding of the study reveals that educators collaboratively develop shared repertoires for teaching and teaching routines to manage the demands of multigrade classrooms. By working together towards a joint goal, educators design and share timetables, lesson plans, worksheets, and classroom management strategies that are relevant to their multigrade day-to-day realities. This serves as evidence of building a shared repertoire through sustained participation in practice (Wenger, 1998). The collaborative combination of topics across grades and differentiation of activities for multigrade learners directly addresses challenges associated with standard monograde curricula and related documentation, as well as inadequate policy guidance (Mpahla & Makena, 2021; Qangule & Letuma, 2025). By grouping learners by ability rather than grade, these multigrade educators developed adaptive teaching practices that alleviated workload pressures and enhanced their classroom management. These findings align with Mansfield et al. (2016), who argue that resilience is developed and maintained through adaptive professional practices collaboratively created in response to contextual adversity. In this study, the establishment of shared routines transformed daily teaching challenges into opportunities for innovation, mutual learning, and sustained professional resilience.

The third finding indicated that curriculum-related challenges represent a significant source of stress for multigrade educators, primarily due to time constraints and the misalignment of CAPS within multigrade teaching contexts (Qangule & Letuma, 2025; Taole et al., 2024). Nevertheless, resilience was apparent as educators collaboratively navigated the curriculum, relying on peer networking, district workshops, and informal professional learning to interpret, filter, and adapt the curriculum. Within a Communities of Practice (CoP) framework, these situated learning practices facilitated educators' negotiation of meaning and the construction of shared understandings of curriculum expectations (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This collective sense-making aligns with the findings of Versfeld et al. (2025), which suggest that collaborative problem-solving enhances resilience in resource-constrained contexts.

The fourth finding of the study underscored burnout and emotional exhaustion as detrimental realities of teaching in rural multigrade classrooms. This was characterised by heavy workloads, limited resources, and financial constraints (Napanan & Castaneda, 2021; Ramrathan & Ngubane, 2013). Despite these pressures, educators exhibited resilience through emotional support embedded within their professional and community networks. Collegial encouragement, informal counselling from retired principals, union-organised social activities, and supportive interactions with subject advisors provided significant protection against stress. These findings correspond with Mansfield et al.'s (2016) concept of resilience, encompassing emotional, relational, and moral dimensions. Consistent with South African studies, resilience among multigrade educators was reinforced through social support, shared humour, optimism, and a strong sense of moral purpose (Schlebusch et al., 2023; Versfeld et al., 2025). Attending to learners' basic needs bolstered educators' professional identity and commitment, illustrating how resilience is sustained through relational and ethical engagement within challenging contexts (Ebersöhn, 2014).

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

This exploratory case study reveals that educator resilience in selected multigrade rural and farm schools in uPhongolo, KwaZulu-Natal, is a socially constructed process facilitated by educators'

participation in collaborative professional communities. Guided by Lave and Wenger's (1991) and Wenger's (1998) Communities of Practice (CoPs) framework, the findings demonstrate that resilience emerges through collaboration with peers and professional networks, the development of shared repertoires for teaching and teaching routines, collective navigation of curriculum challenges, and support during periods of burnout or stress. In their contexts, characterised by limited resources, policy misalignment, and high teaching demands, multigrade educators rely less on formal institutional support and more on personal and professional networks and collective problem-solving to build resilience. These findings indicate that, despite their challenging teaching contexts, resilience can be cultivated in multigrade rural classrooms through everyday social practice rather than through individual coping mechanisms. The study contributes to the literature by demonstrating that educator resilience is dynamic, relational, and contextually embedded, particularly in rural and farm settings.

Several recommendations are proposed. First, provincial and district education authorities should formalise and strengthen school-based and circuit-level CoPs for multigrade educators. This can be achieved by facilitating dedicated time for collaborative planning, peer mentoring, and inter-school networking. Second, targeted professional development should be designed specifically for multigrade teaching, with a focus on curriculum adaptation, differentiated instruction, and classroom management strategies aligned with the CAPS, as highlighted by educators' reliance on informal peer learning. Third, district office support staff, such as subject advisors and circuit managers, should adopt a consistent coaching and mentoring support role, recognising burnout as more than an individual shortcoming. Finally, policy frameworks should provide context-responsive guidelines and resource allocation, reducing educators' reliance on personal coping strategies and reinforcing collective resilience in rural schools. These recommendations propose practical approaches to developing and maintaining educator resilience in rural and farm-school multigrade contexts.

8. Declarations

Author Contributions: Conceptualization (D.L., M.T., J.M. & D.L.); literature review (J.M.); methodology (D.L.); software (N/A.); validation (M.T. & F.M.); formal analysis (D.L.); investigation (M.T., D.L., J.M. & F.M.); data curation (M.T.); drafting and preparation (D.L.); review and editing (M.T., D.L., J.M. & F.M.); supervision (N/A.); project administration (M.T.); funding acquisition (M.T.). All authors have read and approved the published version of the article.

Funding: This research was funded by the University of South Africa, Engaged Scholarship CN5200. The Article Processing Charge (APC) was covered by the University of South Africa.

Acknowledgements: The authors thank the participants of this study for their valuable contributions and their willingness to share experiences that enriched the study.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement: The data are not publicly available due to confidentiality agreements with participants and ethical restrictions imposed by the Institutional Review Board. However, de-identified data can be made available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to approval by the ethics committee.

References

- Barbetta, G. P., Sorrenti, G., & Turati, G. (2021). Multigrading and child achievement. *Journal of Human Resources*, 56(3), 940-968.
- Beltman, S., Dobson, M. R., Mansfield, C. F., & Jay, J. (2020). 'The thing that keeps me going': Educator resilience in early learning settings. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 28(4), 303-318. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669760.2019.1605885>

- Blease, B., & Condy, J. (2015). Teaching of writing in two rural multigrade classes in the Western Cape. *Reading & Writing: Journal of the Reading Association of South Africa*, 6(1), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.4102/rw.v6i1.58>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). Can I use TA? Should I use TA? Should I not use TA? Comparing reflexive thematic analysis and other pattern-based qualitative analytic approaches. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*, 21(1), 37–47. <https://doi.org/10.1002/capr.12360>
- Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2011). *Planning educational research: Research methods in education*. New York: Routledge.
- Courtney, P. (2024). *Rationalising micro, multigrade, and under-subscribed schools in South Africa: A pathway to fiscal efficiency and educational equity* (Teacher Demographic Dividend Research Note No. 19). Research on Socio-Economic Policy (RESEP), Stellenbosch University.
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2016). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Sage.
- Department of Basic Education. (2022). *Personnel administrative measures (PAM)* (Government Gazette No. 47295, Notice No. 2497). Government Printer.
- Dladla, S. (2020). *Multi-grade teaching: A case study of a multi-grade primary school in a rural context in KwaZulu-Natal* (Master's thesis, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg). <https://researchspace.ukzn.ac.za/handle/10413/20009>
- Du Plessis, A., & Subramanien, B. (2014). Voices of despair: Challenges for multigrade teachers in a rural district in South Africa. *Educational Research for Social Change*, 3(1), 20–36.
- Ebersöhn, L. (2014). Teacher resilience: Theorizing resilience and poverty. *Teachers and Teaching*, 20(5), 568–594. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2014.937960>
- Hamilton, J. B. (2020). Rigor in qualitative methods: An evaluation of strategies among underrepresented rural communities. *Qualitative Health Research*, 30(2), 196–204. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732319860267>
- Hennink, M., Hutter, I., & Bailey, A. (2020). *Qualitative research methods*. Sage.
- Idris, J. (2020). School leaders' challenges and needs in leading and managing the multigrade classrooms practice. *International Journal of Research and Scientific Innovation*, 7(6), 168–173.
- Jonker, C., Graham, M. A., & Ebersöhn, L. (2025). Teacher resilience in South Africa: The self-efficacy and teacher efficacy of pre-service teachers preparing to teach in a challenged context. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 50(1). <https://doi.org/10.14221/1835-517X.6373>
- Kalender, B., & Erdem, E. (2021). Challenges faced by classroom teachers in multigrade classrooms: A case study. *Journal of Pedagogical Research*, 5(4), 76–91. <https://doi.org/10.33902/JPR.2021473490>
- Karaçoban, F., & Karakuş, M. (2022). Evaluation of the curriculum of the teaching in the multigrade classrooms course: Participatory evaluation approach. *Pegem Journal of Education and Instruction*, 12(1). <https://doi.org/10.47750/pegegog.12.01.09>
- Kivunja, C., & Sims, M. (2015). Perceptions of multi-grade teaching: A narrative inquiry into the voices of stakeholders in multi-grade contexts in rural Zambia. *Higher Education Studies*, 5(2), 10–20. <https://doi.org/10.5539/hes.v5n2p10>
- KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education. (2022). *Annual report 2021/2022*. KwaZulu-Natal Provincial Government.
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge University Press.
- Leahy, K., Calderón, A., O'Meara, N., Macphail, A., & O'Flaherty, J. (2025). Navigating times of change through communities of practice: A focus on teacher educators' realities and professional learning. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 156, 104925. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2025.104925>

- Maharaj, N., & Chauke, T. A. (2025). Teachers' challenges in rural schools in South Africa. *International Journal*, 16, e2025235. <https://doi.org/10.22521/edupij.2025.16.235>
- Mansfield, C. F., Beltman, S., Broadley, T., & Weatherby-Fell, N. (2016). Building resilience in teacher education: An evidence-informed framework. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 54, 77–87. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2015.11.016>
- Mead, T., Pietsch, C., Matthew, V., Lipkin-Moore, S., Metzger, E., Avdeev, I. V., & Ruzycki, N. J. (2021). Leveraging a community of practice to build faculty resilience and support innovations in teaching during a time of crisis. *Sustainability*, 13(18), 10172. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su131810172>
- Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (4th ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Meshkinfam, M., Khosravi Badabi, A., Abbasi Sarvak, L., & Poushaneh, K. (2023). Validating and presenting the curriculum pattern of multi-grade classes of elementary school. *Iranian Journal of Educational Sociology*, 6(4), 86–95.
- Mpahla, N. E., & Makena, B. (2021). Rural primary teachers' experiences of quality teaching and learning in multi-grade schools. *ICERI2021 Proceedings: 14th Annual International Conference of Education*, 7445–7448.
- Msimanga, M. R. (2019). Managing the use of resources in multi-grade classrooms. *South African Journal of Education*, 39(3). <https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v39n3a1599>
- Msimanga, M. R. (2020). Teaching and learning in multi-grade classrooms: The LEPO framework. *Africa Education Review*, 17(3), 123–141. <https://doi.org/10.1080/18146627.2019.1671877>
- Municipalities.co.za. (n.d.). *UPhongolo Local Municipality demographic profile*. <https://municipalities.co.za/demographic/1116/uphongolo-local-municipality>
- Naparan, G., & Alinsug, V. G. (2021). Classroom strategies of multigrade teachers. *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, 3(1), 100109. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2021.100109>
- Naparan, G., & Castaneda, I. (2021). Challenges and coping strategies of multigrade teachers. *International Journal of Theory and Application in Elementary and Secondary School Education*, 3(1), 25–34. <https://doi.org/10.31098/ijtaese.v3i1.510>
- Parson, L., Hunter, C. A., & Kallio, B. (2016). Exploring educational leadership in rural schools. *Planning & Changing*, 47.
- Qangule, T., & Letuma, M. C. (2025, October). One teacher, many grades: Foundation Phase teachers' experiences in multigrade classroom management. In *Frontiers in Education* (Vol. 10, p. 1685825). Frontiers Media SA. <https://doi.org/10.3389/educ.2025.1685825>
- Ramrathan, L., & Ngubane, T. I. (2013). Instructional leadership in multi-grade classrooms: What can mono-grade teachers learn from their resilience? *Education as Change*, 17(sup1), S93–S105. <https://doi.org/10.1080/16823206.2014.865995>
- Recla, L. C. B., & Potane, J. D. (2024). Teachers' challenges and practices in handling multigrade classes: A systematic review. *ASEAN Journal of Open and Distance Learning*, 15(1), 73–87.
- Ruelan, M.C., & Ebisa, E.E. (2025). Diverse classrooms: Challenges and coping practices of multigrade teachers. *Psychology and Education: A Multidisciplinary Journal*, 44(5), 588–602. <https://doi.org/10.70838/pemj.440507>
- Saldaña, J. (2021). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (4th ed.). Sage.
- Schlebusch, L., Schlebusch, G., & Matjeane, L. (2023). Fostering resilience in South African township primary school teachers. *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research*, 22, 58–73. <https://doi.org/10.26803/ijlter.22.5.3>
- Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of the case study research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Statistics South Africa. (2022). *Census 2022 statistical release (Report 03-01-01)*. Pretoria: Statistics South Africa.

- Taole, M. J. (2018). Diversity and inclusion in rural South African multigrade classrooms. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 24(12), 1268–1284. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2018.1520310>
- Taole, M. (2024). ICT integration in a multigrade context: Exploring primary school teachers' experiences. *Research in Social Sciences and Technology*, 9, 232–252. <https://doi.org/10.46303/ressat.2024.13>
- Taole, M. J., Mudau, P. K., Majola, X. M., & Mukhati, F. (2024). Instructional leadership challenges in rural multigrade schools. *Research in Educational Policy and Management*, 6(1), 102–122. <https://doi.org/10.46303/repam.2024.8>
- Tredoux, M. (2020). *Managing multi-grade teaching for optimal learning in Gauteng West primary schools* (Order No. 32036217). ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.
- uPhongolo Local Municipality. (2026). *Draft integrated development plan (IDP) 2026–2027*. <https://www.uphongolo.gov.za/index.php/integrated-development-plan>
- United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation. (2020). *Global education monitoring report, Central and the Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia: Inclusion and education: All means*. Paris: UNESCO. <http://bit.ly/2020gemreport>
- Vehovar, V., Toepol, V., & Steinmetz, S. (2016). Non-probability sampling. In C. Wolf, D. Joye, T. W. Smith, & Y. C. Fu (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of survey methodology* (pp. 329–345). SAGE.
- Versfeld, J., Ebersöhn, L., Ferreira, R., & Graham, M. A. (2025). Social connectedness as a pathway to teacher resilience in challenged contexts. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 131, 102601. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2025.102601>
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge University Press.
- Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (Vol. 6). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Zulu, F. Q. B., & Mukeredzi, T. G. (2021). A case study of two teacher learning communities in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. *South African Journal of Education*, 41(3), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v41n3a1877>

Disclaimer: The views, perspectives, information, and data contained within all publications are exclusively those of the respective author(s) and contributor(s) and do not represent or reflect the positions of ERRCD Forum and/or its editor(s). ERRCD Forum and its editor(s) expressly disclaim responsibility for any damages to persons or property arising from any ideas, methods, instructions, or products referenced in the content.