

Multi-Grade Teaching: A Blessing in Disguise

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Abstract

The supremacy of monograde or straight classroom is a trend in the education system where students of a similar age range are assigned to a single grade level but with a range of abilities, however, in multigrade classrooms, one teacher teaches students from two or more grades at the same time. With the advent of children's right to Education, the governments of various nations are striving to provide basic education to students. Especially on rural backgrounds and remote areas arrangements are in the form of Multi-grade teaching. Multi-Grade-Teaching- popular as MGT involves a teacher to be highly effective with managerial skills. This includes tripartite management in three different dimensions-viz. management of Students, management of Classroom and management of self. At students level the management includes time, behavior, relationship among students and responsibilities assigned to students. Classroom management includes management of physical resources and materials, routines and specific activities, whereas self-management focuses on teacher's learning about planning, teaching time, classroom control and delegation of responsibilities. As stated in UNESCO's report, "It is your responsibility as a multi grade teacher to plan and organize your classroom to get the best results from the space and resources available to you." This paper focuses to draw out the positive sides of MGT as suggested by the title and to get the feel of status of MGT in Fijian context.

Keywords: MGT; Primary Education; Teacher Training Skills

Introduction

When it comes to describing school, we say that school is a place where teacher teaches and students learn. With reference to Multi-grade teaching the scenario is remorse. Right to Education has been proposed by UNESCO and world over attempts are being made to provide education to all children. However, in rural and remote areas, it becomes difficult. In such places, teaching is done with the help of minimum number of available teachers. This is because the number of students is less and hence to cut the cost. Teachers are forced to teach students of various age range, abilities and classes. This creates some situations in which MGT teachers are undermined not only by the colleagues but also by the society as a whole.

During 60s and 70s, teachers realized that the skills needed for effective MG teaching were never a part of their training program.

Classrooms for MGT indicate lot of diversities such as race, ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status, abilities or disabilities. As pointed out by Lingam [1], "Broadly speaking, the notion that every class is a multi-class is true. Therefore, a straight class is also a multi-class because children of different ages, abilities, interests and needs are found in straight class". Providing equal educational support to all stu-

dents means that teachers are supportive of children and accept their differences and schools promote the full development of students as individuals without regard for such diversities. Teachers need to develop classrooms such that a learning environment that recognizes children's strengths and differences is regarded as being positive because it allows children to share and experience diverse perspectives (Banks, Cochran-Smith, Moll, Richet, Zeichner, LePage, Darling-Hammond, Duffy and McDonald, 2005). According to Villegas and Lucas [2] culturally responsive teachers have multiple ways of perceiving reality. They hold positive views of students from diverse backgrounds and believe in bringing about change to make schools more equitable.

MGT is a teaching of two or more classes/years of students in the same classroom by one and the same teacher. It is also referred as combination class, composite class, split or multi-level class. To address this issue different countries have been able to find out ways and means, although some of them have been quite useful. This research paper tries to explore the ways and means that have been followed in FIJI with regards to MGT.

The multi-grade classroom can be more of a challenge than the single-grade classroom. Skills and behavior required of the teacher may be different and coordinating activities can be more difficult. In fact, such a realization is one reason why graded schools came into being in the first place (Callahan, 1962) as cited in Eric Digest [3]. Little, Angela [4] rightly suggests that the knowledge required for effective multi-grade teaching is ignored and rendered illegitimate by those responsible for training and supporting teachers.

Definitions

In order to understand the focus of research questions well, it would be appropriate to define the key words used in this paper. These are:

- **Multigrade teaching:** Popular as MGT- is a situation in which one teacher has to teach many grades, all at the same time. It happens in all schools where there are more grades than teachers. Any class in which students of different grade levels are placed together for administrative reasons- is MG class. As a philosophical reason the students benefit from the range and diversity possible with multi-age grouping, which reflects a deliberate and systematic mixing of students of different ages as desirable and as beneficial to students-from effectiveness of multi-grade classes: cooperative learning as a key element of success.

A range of teaching offered to heterogeneous group of students differing on age, behavior, knowledge, skills and values.

- **Primary education:** Primary school education is most often referred to as elementary school or grade school and is usually composed of grades one through six. The main purpose of primary education is to give children a strong foundation in the basics of a general curriculum, with emphasis on reading and math.

Education that provides students with basic understanding of various subjects and skills to be used throughout their life is primary education.

- **Teacher training skills:** These are the skills that the primary teachers are supposed to have acquired through their teacher training program such as diploma in primary teaching or B.Ed. primary program. These skills are basically related to communication, literacy and numeracy and are also supported by other managerial skills at the students' level, at the classroom level and at the teaching level.

Essential skills required for teaching and acquired during training.

Rationale

Negative attitude and perception mostly prevail when it comes to MG teaching. Also, Pre-service teachers are generally trained to work and teach in mono-grade classrooms. Their knowledge of teaching method is based on whole-class and small-group instruction where

groups often are formed, based on ability or achievement level. When placed in a multi-grade setting, some teachers and students from monograde schools find it very challenging. Does the training received by teachers cater well to teach in multi-grade class rooms? Does multi-grade teaching enhance students' learning and performance? These were some of the questions that were focused to carry forward this research, in the light of following thesis:

- **Thesis:** MGT is not a mere administrative arrangement; it is a blessing, if utilized appropriately.

Research questions

1. What training is provided to teachers to teach in MG classes?
2. What are the challenges faced by teachers during MG teaching?

Objectives of the Study

1. To identify skills received by teachers during training.
2. To categorize challenges faced by teachers during MG teaching.
3. To ascertain learners' personality development.

Review of Literature

Recent researches conducted on Multi-Grade Teaching indicated that quite a number of researches are done and are available in the web-based links or websites. A few of them were picked up for review suiting to needs of this paper and also keeping the word limit.

- Little, Angela [4]: Multi-Grade Teaching: A Review of Research and Practice. Education Research Paper. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED459042>.

This paper highlights the fact that knowledge required for effective multi-grade teaching is ignored and rendered illegitimate by those responsible for training and supporting teachers.

- Allington, Richard L.; Johnston, Peter H. [5]: What Do We Know about Effective Fourth-Grade Teachers and Their Classrooms? CELA Research Report.

This research report summarizes the features associated with exemplary teaching at the upper elementary level drawn from available research. Findings show substantial convergence between the previous studies and their own; in addition, their analyses show that exemplary teachers produce the kinds of student literacy achievement that is beyond even the most sophisticated standardized tests.

- Carol Ann Tomlinson, Catherine Brighton, Holly Hertberg (2003): Differentiating Instruction in Response to Student Readiness, Interest, and Learning Profile in Academically Diverse Classrooms.

As given in abstract, both the current school reform and standards movements call for enhanced quality of instruction for all learners. Recent emphases on heterogeneity, special education inclusion, and reduction in out-of-class services for gifted learners, combined with escalations in cultural diversity in classrooms, make the challenge of serving academically diverse learners in regular classrooms seem an inevitable part of a teacher's role. This review of literature examines a need for "differentiated" or academically responsive instruction.

It provides support in theory and research for differentiating instruction based on a model of addressing student readiness, interest, and learning profile for a broad range of learners in mixed-ability classroom settings.

- Simon Veenman (1995): Cognitive and Non-cognitive Effects of Multi-grade and Multi-Age Classes: A Best-Evidence Synthesis, <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.3102/00346543065004319>.
- Linley Lloyd (1999): Multi-age classes and high ability students.

This article reviews research on multi-age classroom organization as an option for high ability students. Studies of both cognitive and affective factors in multi-age contexts have consistently shown positive, sometimes significant, effect sizes. Studies of different types of ability grouping have shown that arrangements most likely to have positive and significant results are those where the curriculum is differentiated. Teachers of multi-age classes may be more likely to see their students as diverse as similar and to provide developmentally appropriate (that is, differentiated) curricula. Multi-age classes are discussed as an alternative to self-contained classes and pullout programs for high ability children. <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.3102/00346543069002187>.

It could be inferred from the review of researches done that MGT is still a gray area to be further researched with different dimensions. Present research thus was a need of the day as it is related to teacher training.

Research Methodology

Population and sample

While teaching education unit to In-service teachers, the authors decided to find out the status of MGT in Fiji primary schools. There were around 80 in-service teachers enrolled for the trimester in which this study was carried out (summer: 2017). Of these 25 students involved in MG teaching made the sample. The sample for the study was thus an inclusive or purposive sample, from non-probability domain.

Data collection

Required data was collected from 25 in-service teachers, by administering a tool that was self-made questionnaire.

The tools used

Considering the research questions and objectives of the study, authors decided to make use of self-made questionnaire to collect data from the subjects. This questionnaire had ten questions related to MG teaching experiences of teachers and ten questions related to their perceptions about MG teaching.

Reliability and validity of self-made tools

Although there was no scope for testing validity and reliability of tool statistically, yet the responses given by subjects indicated that the self-made questionnaire had face as well as construct validity and internal reliability or internal consistency.

Statistical techniques

Data was mainly qualitative. Therefore, other than percentage, no statistical techniques were used.

Results and Discussion

Teachers' responses to questionnaire were recorded in three sections for the sake of convenience as well as consolidation of their views under.

Information related to teaching experiences and skills received during training

Majority of the teachers (67%) were of the view that they did not have adequate skills and training experiences for teaching MG classes. Some of the units such as mathematics Education, Science Education or Language and Literature catered for integrating teaching skills, but they were not enough. Teachers having two years of teaching experience to 5 years of teaching experience were of the same view that training facilities should be such that trainee teachers will get more and prolonged training skills to cater for MG teaching. All 100% of the subjects were of the view that completion of syllabus in MG classes is not possible and therefore should not be stressed by the School Heads, other stake holders and Ministry people. Teachers should be given free hand to check on students' progress in MG teaching set up. The time-table also should be flexible. These teachers also suggested that time management, planning and effective use of peer teaching and group work should be considered during training as well as during students' evaluation. Thus, the observation of teachers' responses indicate that at students' level they cannot manage MG class due to time constraint, inflexibility of time, relationship amongst students and responsibilities assigned to students. Their classroom management also suffers weaknesses such as lack of physical resources and materials, routine activities as well as specific activities, whereas their self-management collapses when their teaching time is to be swapped with other duties assigned, as also classroom control. They have not been practicing assigning or delegating duties and responsibilities to students, neither younger, nor older students.

Information related to teachers' perceptions about MG teaching and challenges faced

All 100% of the teachers expressed that teaching MG classes is more challenging than teaching mono-grade or straight classes, as it requires more preparation and better planning and time management. It also means that the time-table needs to be flexible, as suggested by 65% teachers. These elements should be well captured in training program making MG teaching practice extensive from 6 weeks to 14 weeks. About 47% teachers suggested 6 weeks training but majority about 53% suggested 12 - 14 weeks long training. Need of minimum resources such as two separate chalk boards and seating arrangement was highlighted by 74% teachers, whereas 26% said that one chalkboard will be enough, if 100% syllabus completion is not a compulsory judgmental factor. About 45% teachers were of the opinion that MG teaching sharpens the confidence of learners along with communication skills. It also introduces an essence of competition.

The answers also reflect on these teachers' perception related to management at student level at classroom level and at their self-level. It was obvious that these teachers felt lack of skills in relation to time management, as there was no flexibility of time. Since most of the times physical and material resources were lacking, their classroom management also fails. At their own level their planning about teaching time, classroom control and delegating responsibilities to students also fails, mostly because these skills were never acquired by them during training program.

Learners' personality development- Author's personal experiences

Teachers from the sample involved in Multi-grade teaching mentioned about developmental changes in students highlighting the confidence level, communication skills and element of competition, which aligns with author's experience. While engaged in supervision of In-service teachers, back home in India, one of the authors remembered that teachers in MG teaching were more involved in planning, as 100% completion of syllabus was waived off considering the feeble no. of students admitted to schools in rural, remote and difficult hilly geographical areas. They utilized students of upper classes sharing the same classroom to becoming volunteer to, 'teach' youngsters, a phenomenon of peer tutoring. By this their level of confidence, leadership qualities and communication skill increased, as compared to

non-volunteering students. They were also highly motivated as they had developed a feeling of, 'helping' their teacher. Along with this also developed sense of responsibility and sense of belongingness, such that they used to seek permission of teacher to go to students' house to fetch them to school, if they remained absent. Daily cleaning of class room and surroundings was an unwritten rule of the school, which students, especially elder students would do on their own and would take youngsters with them. Simple mathematical calculations such as addition, subtraction were done using the leaves of surrounding trees or flowers in absence of resources. Scientific concepts such as pressure, force, flow, were explained to students while taking them to village tour and riverside. One teacher took all the students of year 1 to year 4 and asked them to bring and observe hibiscus flower on a small twig to identify color, symmetry of a flower and count sepals, petals, anthers and stamens and their multiples. With the same hibiscus flower, she explained geometrical shapes to students, calculation of area on a leaf, arrangement of leaves on a stem and also introduced symbiosis and mutualism between hibiscus flower and honey bees. For lower classes, there was also an element of drawing and coloring. This also gave the impression that in spite of waiver of 100% completion of syllabus, such teachers could bring tremendous changes in thought process of the students. The novice observer might get a feeling that there was no class control, as all students were busy doing something or other. But to the author as long as students were following what the teacher was demanding, there was a perfect class control. Class control is not necessarily to be equated with pin drop silence. The author as an observer was sure that these students having gained so much of an experience just with hibiscus would never forget what they learnt through. It was a consolidated, integrated learning experience for them, coupled with behavior modification such as caring and protecting environment and personality development. The same innovative teacher later received a state level award. After all, knowledge is knowledge whether received practically or theoretically, whether received verbally or in written form. The bottom line is gaining knowledge, which becomes worthwhile, if connected to real life. Exemplary teachers produce the kinds of student literacy achievement that is beyond even the most sophisticated standardized tests [5].

MG teaching has an element of social development also. As suggested by Nadeem Saqlain [6], "Multi-grade education is as effective as single-grade schooling in terms of academic achievement and better in terms of social learning".

Rebecca [7] and Thayer [8] using qualitative method of interviewing concluded that student performance does not enhance academically through multi-grade teaching however, there has been a small scale of social development through this type of classroom.

From the way the teachers handle situation in MG classrooms, it appears that several other and very basic principles and practices emerge from MG classrooms such as:

- Teachers play a role of facilitator rather than knowledge giver or knowledge transmitter.
- Teacher's focus is on child-centered learning which is appropriate to developmental needs and
- Teacher's attention is towards education of a whole child.

It will not be out of place to mention here that MG teaching learning environment creates a feeling of 'familyness', as the elder students take care of educational needs of youngsters just as in families elders caring for siblings. This seems to be further transmitted as newer and younger students join the class. Teachers mainly have to be facilitators and continuously nudge the learners towards their goals.

Objective-wise findings

Keeping in mind the objectives, it was decided to record the findings objective-wise as follows.

To identify skills received by teachers during training

Majority of the subjects reported that they did not receive adequate skills and experiences during their training period to cater for MG teaching. Very few skills such as integrated teaching, communication and delivery of content were focused but generally, not in view of

MG teaching. These teachers also suggested that time management, planning and effective use of peer teaching and group work should be considered during training as well as during students' evaluation. Mariano (2009) found that it is negative mindset of teachers and method of delivering lessons that plays a key role regardless of the type of classroom that affects student performance. The author further states that lack of proper teacher training in teaching multi-grade classrooms and lack of enthusiasm shown by teachers in taking multi-grade classrooms hinders student performance.

To categorize challenges faced by teachers during MG teaching

As suggested by the subjects in sample, preparation, planning, time management, flexibility in time-table, waiver of 100% coverage of syllabus, lack of essential resources were the areas of challenges for the teachers while teaching in MG situations. Thus, they agreed that management at students' level, at class room level and at teacher's level are essential elements to be looked for, while dealing with MG teaching situation. Taole's article [9] highlights the need for in-service training and on-going support for teachers in multi-grade schools for the provision of quality education.

To ascertain learners' personality development

Teachers from the sample involved in Multi-grade teaching mentioned that prominent developmental changes in students of multi-grade classes are seen in rising of the confidence level, communication skills and element of competition, which aligns with author's observations and experiences. In most of the places Multi-grade classes are created for administrative, financial, pedagogical or demographic reasons, but at the same time, they can be seen as assets promoting quality teaching and learning. As supported by Aina [10], Nawab [11] and Ciftci., *et al.* [12] through their qualitative research that multi grade teaching helped children to progress at their own pace, as competition was not given importance while learning and teaching. They concluded that individualization was valued and students were not labeled based on their achievement. It was further supported that students learn from one another as they engage in activities such as group work and presentation thus developing into active learners and not passive learners. Children's views were acknowledged by the teacher, which built student confidence along with respect for each other. Students talked openly about their views without hesitation and gained more information while participating in group-work with different age group. The researchers further stated that collaboration with the parents revealed the children were motivated to maximum to learn and homework was done with less parental guidance. Children gained self-confidence and sense of responsibility. Nawab [11] further stated that students excelled only with the aid of more appropriate textbooks and the delivery of effective lesson by the teacher [13,14].

Summary

The study suggests that MG teachers need adequate training before they endeavor teaching Multi-grade classes. They need to be prepared well to face boldly the challenges they will meet while teaching multi-grade classes. As suggested by Lingam, '... the professional preparation of teachers should meet the demands of work and related responsibilities in schools with multi classes' [1].

While in most of the situations, Multi-grade teachers are seen to be assuming important position in their local communities, there are places where communities feel that the teachers teaching Multi-grade classes are not worth. The unique dynamics of the teachers is not comprehended by the community members appropriately. It is most of the times, undermined. In fact the teachers teaching multi-grade classes provide a critical link between school and community. Cooperation and assistance required by MG teachers will support co-existence of school with an improved quality of education, in the sense that needed minimal resources such as building and maintaining classrooms, chalk boards and other trivial resources would not be a challenging problem for MG teachers. This also suggests that there are rewards as well as challenges in multi-grade class rooms. A highly dynamic teacher only will sustain the challenges of multi-grade teaching. It has been rightly expressed that the multi- grade classroom is not for the timid, inexperienced, or untrained teacher. Clearly, the

implications for teacher educators, rural school board members, administrators, and parents are far-reaching. <https://www.ericdigests.org/pre-9221/teaching.htm>.

Conclusion

Multi-grade is effective and it provides an economic solution to the difficulties of providing increased access for children in a populated rural area where it is difficult to provide the sufficient number of teachers needed for the mono grade classes. In some rural, small primary schools have higher rate of students in multi grade classrooms than in mono grade classrooms.

Most multi-grade settings are seen in rural areas. However, some teachers from urban areas also group students for pedagogical choices. Students in multi-grade settings learn social skills better than those who are in mono-grade settings. If we want to see multi-grade schooling successful, the involvement of parents, educators, policy makers and local educational community is very important. Multi-grade education is cost effective and one of the best solutions of shortage of teachers in remote areas. The success of multi grade education will depend on the proper implementation of the program through teacher training, the provision of learning material and community support. Therefore, there is an immense need of community understanding and involvement. Although there are assorted challenges in multi-grade teaching, it is not impossible.

In fact, accepting it as a challenge, in some urban areas the private, self-financed schools are trying to build up further on multi-grade teachings in view of subject-wise integration of high ability students. The results in such schools may further be significant and positive, as the curriculum would be differentiated and suited to diverse needs as also would be developmentally appropriate. This would also provide scope to each learner progress by their own pace, without really waiting for their age or age-related maturity.

Suggestions

Teaching is considered as a noble profession world over. This is more so when the teacher is to teach in multi-grade classroom. It is really a challenging job. These teachers teaching in multi-Grade Classrooms become successful only when they consider teaching as a vocation. Only then they become ready to sacrifice their time, comfort and other priorities. As stated by A. P. J. Abdul Kalam, "Teaching is a very noble profession that shapes the character, caliber, and future of an individual".

The question of what makes a good teacher has been around for a long time. It's an enquiry that poses many problems because there's simply no set Criteria for success, and different approaches work for different professionals and Different Level students, as also with different set ups. Multi-grade teaching thus could be an option for kindling high ability students and the best alternative for self-contained classes or mono classes. Those who were criticizing MG teaching would see that it brings a number of positive outcomes thus proving: A blessing in disguise!

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