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MULTI-GRADE TEACHING AS AN INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGY: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

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INTRODUCTION

Multi-grade teaching is considered as a panacea for improving the teaching learning process in the multi-grade classroom in rural and slum urban areas. But, owing to various reasons it has failed to impart quality education in the multi-grade classrooms. One reason could be that the multi-grade teaching was never ever considered as an instructional strategy in one roomed primary school perhaps because of the lack of pedagogical understanding, knowledge, skills of teachers and others. Now-a-days this approach has become problematic about its effective use in the multi-grade classroom since teachers are frequently ill prepared to deal with the complexities of a multi-grade environment. This problem is often exacerbated by the national educational policies which emphasise subject approach to curriculum and students evaluation in which grading is required in each achievement area. On the other hand the instructional material, teacher guides produced to help multi-grade classroom teachers in using multi-grade teaching which were found to be irrelevant since these were prepared for single grade classroom rather than multi-grade classroom teachers. To overcome this problem, it requires a complete change either in pedagogical approach or school organisation so that the multi-grade classroom learning could be improved. A spill over benefit of this approach is that the teachers consider the students' cognitive and effective aspects in learning while designing classroom activities that allow students to work on their own enabling them to become responsible for their own learning.

MULTI-GRADE TEACHING AS AN INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGY

Multi-grade teaching as an instructional strategy is a buzz word used in the literature and it seems a complex process of teaching which requires certain attitude, knowledge, skills and competence to teach any topic in a multi-grade classroom. Multi-grade teaching has been defined in several ways. For example; Stenhay (1970) defines it as an instructional strategy through which students of various ages, abilities and interests are taught in a learning situation. Mycock (1972) further adds that it is a method of school organization in which children of different ages are put together in the same class under the deliberative educational policy. Thomas and Shaw (1992) consider it a set of techniques that allow a teacher to use them for effective teaching with a group of students of various ages and capabilities. However, this technique is mostly used in the multi-grade classroom by one teacher. Thus, it is necessary to have trained teachers for applying this approach in the multi-grade classroom however teaching might not be effective in the multi-grade classroom. Strawbridge (1994) identifies three types of different multi-grade classrooms which are as follows:

i) Two grades are kept in one room and taught by one teacher. These two groups receive some treatment when activities are pitched at individual ability levels or in small groups depending on the subject area being taught. The teacher covers similar topics and objectives with the whole class and children are able to do activities from both class syllabus.

The literature also suggests that most of the teacher educators and practitioners prefer to apply the third mode of multi-grade teaching. But, in some cases more than two grades are taught by one teacher in school, however, the grades are split according to the instructional and administrative purposes. Therefore, the literature refers to them 'split grades'. The multi-grade teaching seems to have occupied a unique place in the history of
education because it is still a dominant model of educational provision. This is reflected in UNESCO report (1989) which states that the multi-grade teaching is still being used in many schools across the world. For instance 420,000 multi-grade schools in China, 20,000 in Indonesia, 1,540 in Malaysia, 8% of schools in Philippines, 61% of primary schools in India and considerable number of primary schools in Pakistan are functional for numerous reasons. Thomas and Shaw (1992) gives the following reasons for establishing multi-grade schools.

a) To provide a complete primary education cycle, or to expand access in the thinly populated areas;

b) to maintain education services in small towns or villages with declining students intake;

c) to make efficient use of scarce resources; and

d) to improve the effectiveness of educational delivery.

The history of the multi-grade teaching reveals that the most of the economically developed countries started schooling in the multi-grade classroom. Later on a concept of public or popular education emerged as a result of 'paradigm shift' in the international community which led to the practice of graded schools. These schools provide a means of organizing and managing the classroom effectively whereas the multi-grade schools put all the students of various grades irrespective of their ages, abilities and attitudes in one class to be taught by one or two teachers. Now the multi-grade teaching is a world wide phenomenon in the instructional and learning milieu but it seems difficult to implement it successfully.

PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH MULTI-GRADE TEACHING

As mentioned earlier that multi-grade is a common instructional strategy in the educational institutions in the rural and slum urban areas but received a less attention of the policy makers whereas the single-grade schools seem to have received a substantive support from the community and government. The teachers of these schools found easy to teach the students whereas the multi-grade schools were either left at the mercy of the teachers or the supervisory personnel who encounter multifarious problems. Resulting that the multi-grade teaching has become a 'typical issue' that needs to be resolved since this strategy is being extensively used in many parts of the world. Other factors such as the advent of the graded textbooks, state supported education and the demand of trained teachers further strengthened the graded school organization (Goodlad and Anderson, 1963). However, there is a general held opinion among the educators that teaching offered in the graded schools does not appear to be satisfactory but it rather maintains the dominant organizational structure which has become the 'norm and practice' in the society (for further discussion see Miller, 1989).

With regard to multi-grade teaching, very little efforts are made to improve its teaching which still holds significant place on schools (Rule, 1983). According to Miller (1989) in 1960s and 1970s some efforts were made to make multi-grade teaching effective but these efforts seemed to have remained unsuccessful. The various studies on the multi-grade teaching indicate that it requires a rigorous ongoing teacher training and commitment of the teachers and devotion of school management. The findings also show that most teachers who received training for teaching graded schools were placed in multi-grade schools who had a difficulty in managing learning activities in a specific time. These findings seem to be equally valid in Pakistan context. In addition, the untrained teachers are mostly deployed in multi-grade schools who have no professional and technical ‘know how’ about the multi-grade classroom wherein wide range of ages, abilities, interests, backgrounds and experiences are drawn together. Therefore, it puts greater demands on teacher time, organization and planning. Thus, teaching in a multi-grade classroom is more demanding than working with single-grade school.

The UNESCO Conference in 1980 in its conclusion mentioned that problems and learning difficulties created by multi-grade instruction was nearly similar for each country, however, differences are due to the financial, geographic and demographic variables.

The following specific problems were highlighted:

- inadequate trained teacher
- scarcity of varied levels and types of material
- lack of flexible and specified type of curriculum organization for multi-grade classroom
- inadequate facilities
- lack of incentives for teachers of multi-grade classes

PROSPECTS OF MULTI-GRADE CLASSES

Ironically, little or new emphasis is placed on multi-grade instruction in most teacher education programmes (Miller, 1988). Miller (1989) in his review of the 21 studies in multi-grade teaching seeks the following two answers:

1. What effect does multi-grade instruction have on students performance?
2. What kind of teacher preparation or training is needed to be an effective teacher in multi-grade classroom?

In his review of the studies, he found out that generally most of the studies tend to favour the multi-grade classroom. He also found that teachers' preparation and support through curriculum and materials would facilitate the teachers' task in meeting the varying needs of individual students in multi-grade teaching. In his work, Miller (1989) mentions that despite the problems for multi-grade teaching, there are some advantages to multi-grade classroom. According to him, a flexible schedule can meet the individual needs and interests. Multi-grade classroom offers ample opportunity for students to become resourceful and independent learners. Multi-grade classroom seems to have the following positive points:

- friendly relationship and atmosphere
- cooperation among students

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understanding and respect for each other

- teacher closely work with students

- students know their teachers

- students work in cooperative group and social skills are developed

- the students' diversity in the class room is met

- teachers should have ability to plan and organize

- individualized instruction and tutorials for older students

- greater opportunity for teachers to be innovative

- teachers develop skills in curriculum development

- class room organization, individualized instruction and collecting resources and materials

- efficient means of providing basic education in thinly populated areas

- achieve higher achievement levels in areas such as maths, language and science

- represents the culture life and national identity

- students learn to learn and learn to teach through independent inquiry and peer tutoring

Gajadharsingh (1991) observed that the multi-grade programme tends to favour socialization, independence and interaction with peer learners. The youngest feel more secure, demonstrate more assurance and feel more appreciated; the oldest develop a social sense and a spirit of cooperation. Many studies indicate that the multi-grade grouping influences the socio-affective development of children, but it seems to have not received its due recognition from the teachers, educators, parents, students and planners. Like the graded classroom teaching perhaps no serious thought was given to it in spite of the fact that the latter type of teaching is not very common in rural and slum urban areas of Pakistan. Miller (1989) argues that for rural education, multi-grade instruction is not an experiment or a new educational trend but it is a forceful reality because of lack of physical facilities/poverty/staggered population in small settlements. There is a need to prepare teacher education programmes in multi-grade teaching in rural teachers. Milburn (1981) found that the students of a larger class in multi-grade school performed well in the single-grade school. Multi-grade teaching can be effective if the classroom context is considered. Even in some cases the multi-grade classrooms have the greater impact on students performance in different domains (Pratt, 1985).

Mycock (1966) found that multi-grade teachers had significantly better teacher-child relationships and better social development than single grade students but needs to be implemented effectively.

CONCLUSION

To sum up the above discussion, multi-grade teaching needs a recognition at the governmental level and it should be made a part of the teacher education programmes in Pakistan so that the teachers who will be serving in the rural and slum urban areas are able to learn how to use this approach in the multi-grade classroom. The above studies were conducted out side Pakistan, therefore, there is a need to conduct an in-depth study that can help in understanding the specific issues of the multi-grade teaching in Pakistan and further developing teacher training programmes for the rural primary school teachers for improving the teaching learning process in Pakistan. A recent study conducted by IED and AIE also suggests the effective use of the multi-grade teaching in the rural areas of Pakistan. It further suggests that teachers may be provided with the instructional material on classroom organization, classroom management and discipline, instructional organization and curriculum, instructional delivery and group work, self directed learning, and using peer tutoring.

In his study conducted in Pakistan, Moladad (1995) found that the ‘vertical thematic’ approach and peer tutoring technique were useful in the multi-grade classes to maximize the utilization of students’ time on learning tasks and to give them meaningful tasks that would do better learning. Peer tutoring technique (one to one teaching process in which the tutor is of the same general academic status as the tutee) was also found to be useful as it helped the teacher to enhance students interaction and sharing of ideas. The students showed their positive attitude. They opened up within a short time and started taking interest which was found to be encouraging. The teachers also found that good lesson planning for multi-grade teaching is more essential than for single grade teaching since teachers have to ensure the completion of required syllabus and time spent in learning is maximized. Thematic approach allowed teachers to design learning activities for the learners based on a common topic for two classes. In order to improve the practice of multi-grade teaching in the schools it needs to be incorporated in the teacher education programmes grounded in field based experiences. The novice teachers need to work with the experienced teacher until he or she feels confident to apply this technique in the classroom. Peer tutoring strategy should be encouraged and also be made a part of ongoing training programmes.

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Participating teachers graduated from the IED program in June this year and are now working as Master Teachers. Early research evidence suggests great differences between the way the Master Teachers now conceptualise and perceive teaching, their role as teachers and teacher educators, their understanding of curriculum and student-teacher relationships, and the way they perceive these issues at the beginning of the program. There are plans under way to conduct further research into whether these changed perceptions are translated into classroom action.

Challenges

Efforts at working toward the achievement of quality education in the developing world are often fraught with difficulties, challenges and frustrations. The IED’s attempt to improve the quality of teachers through an improved professionalization of teacher educators has been met with a fair share of challenges. The major challenges have been in the area of resolving the contradiction between what the IED is doing to improve education and the realities existing in the countries it is serving. As the program has unfolded several challenges have emerged, a few of which I will mention here.

1. The difficulty of teachers developing habits of inquiry, reflection and critical thinking in an educational culture characterized by routinization, expository teaching and rote learning.

2. The difficulty of changing teachers’ beliefs and conceptions about subject knowledge, the learner and the task of the teacher. Most teachers know their subject content as static, unidimensional and absolute, and learners as empty vessels to be filled with this content by the teachers because learners are seen as incapable of interpreting and re-constructing knowledge. Much of the teacher learning that has occurred in the IED program has consisted of developing ways of challenging, extending and changing these beliefs so that a broader nation of pedagogical content knowledge can be acquired.

3. The difficulty of teachers building collaborative and collegial relationships which will support their effort at change and their work as teachers. Because of prior experiences from previous teacher education programs, the teachers see teaching as an isolated and individualistic process. Compounding this perception in Pakistan is the practice of school heads selecting “outstanding” teachers and giving them awards and recognition for their performance during the year. Competing for this type of recognition makes it difficult for teachers to share ideas and materials or work in mutually supportive ways. Slowly, however, the IED is succeeding in convincing these teachers that being an outstanding teacher also includes the ability to share and receive ideas from others.

4. The over-dependency of mentees on mentors in the mentoring relationships developing between the IED graduates and the teachers they are now mentoring. The cognitive and personal growth which we had hoped would occur through the confrontation of mentees’ beliefs and conceptions about teaching and learning with those of the mentors is being stymied by two factors: a) The tremendous disparity in knowledge between mentor and mentee which has resulted in mentors becoming more dominant than we had hoped for. b) The belief among mentor that the mentors, being graduates of a prestigious University, have superior knowledge which cannot be challenged. In many cases, decision making, rather than being bilateral or reciprocal, is left to the mentors.

5. The difficulty of recruiting Visiting Teachers for the Master Teachers to work with. In many cases school heads cannot afford the financial commitment involved in finding replacements for teachers leaving to participate in professional development programs. In addition teachers are themselves not committed to continuous professional improvement and do not see it as part of professional responsibility, especially when such efforts do not necessarily result in a raise in salary or improvement in conditions of service.

6. The examination systems of the countries the IED is serving which test students mainly for recall of factual information and not the kind of knowledge, skills, abilities, attitudes and dispositions which the IED is preparing its teachers and teacher educators to encourage and promote among students. To resolve this problem in Pakistan the IED is currently working with the government, the Ministry of Education and the examinations boards to bring about the necessary reforms. This task will not be met with immediate success but the IED’s initiative in this direction is a step forward in the change process.

Some of these challenges point up the need for structural adjustments in several areas in order to bring about improved quality of learning in schools. Others simply reflect the difficulty of instituting change. Increasingly the IED is realizing that change is a slow and difficult process.

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