Multigrade Teaching: An Inevitable Option

Suwaibah Mansoor
Research and Policy Analyst
Idara-e-Taleem-o-Aagahi

Multigrade teaching occurs when one teacher teaches more than one grade within the allotted timetabled period. The teacher has to teach across 2 or more curriculum grades at the same time. The general norm in formal education is that one teacher is responsible for a particular curriculum grade but in many countries across the world there are schools that have multigrade classes. This phenomenon is not particular to the developing world but many developed nations like Sweden, UK and France have multigrade schools.

The existence of multigrade schooling is either by choice (i.e. adopted as a special pedagogical technique) or by necessity. Certain studies indicate that multigrade teaching helps inculcate certain positive skill in students such as peer socialization and self study therefore; it is adopted as a constructive pedagogy choice. More often than not multigrade teaching is a result of necessity rather than by choice. Little (2001) mentions certain conditions under which multigrade teaching becomes the norm; for instance schools in areas of low population density where schools are widely scattered and enrollment is low, schools where teacher absenteeism is high and schools in which official number of teachers deployed justifies mono-grade teaching but where the actual number deployed is less. Also at times inadequate school facilities such as insufficient number of classrooms lead to multigrade teaching.

In such scenarios multigrade teaching exists, but not in its true spirit. Teachers who are trained only in single-grade teaching continue to teach in the same manner without regard to the needs of a multigrade setup. Due to this multigrade classes end up being no different from mono-grade classes. Any potential positive impact that multigrade teaching may have gets eliminated. Multigrade teaching requires special training and learning materials without which it becomes difficult for the teacher to cater to the needs of students of more than one grade at the same time. Students then in this case feel neglected and get bored easily which in turn affects their learning levels. Multigrade teaching can thus become a problematic issue if not implemented properly.

Multigrade teaching and EFA Goals

Countries which have not yet achieved full participation in primary schools are plagued with problems such as inadequate resource allocation for infrastructure development, lack of teachers, unwillingness of teachers to teach in remote areas, insufficient number of schools etc. In this context some educationists are of the view that multigrade schooling can play a significant role in fulfilling EFA and MDG commitments. This is especially true for areas where the alternative to multigrade schooling no schooling at all.

Multigrade schools require fewer classrooms and teachers as compared to mono-grade schools. Such schools can be established cheaply and therefore can be numerous in number; and can be easily located in remote settlements. This can help overcome the problem of access to schooling in inaccessible areas, where due to lack of teaching staff education is non-existent. Not only does multigrade schooling represents a more efficient use of teaching staff that can help resolve the teacher shortage problem but multigrade schools, being smaller and more dispersed can enjoy much closer links with the smaller communities where they are setup.

Prevalence of Multigrade Teaching

Accurate data on the prevalence of multigrade schooling is not readily available as it is not often accepted as a separate entity expect in places where it is introduced by choice. Schools are usually assumed to be teaching under a mono-grade setup but in reality a number of classes in the same school are being conducted as multigrades. According to a report by CREATE (2008) around 30% of children worldwide and in developing countries are enrolled in de facto multigrade schools. In places like Australia, Sweden and France where 40%, 35% and 22% schools are multigrade respectively. These are out of choice as compared to Sri Lanka or India where multigrade setup exists out of necessity. In Sri Lanka, 63% of all public schools have 4 or fewer teachers. Some are primary schools with 5 grades and some are primary and post-primary with up to 11 grades. It follows from this that some teachers must be responsible for classes spanning two or more grades for some part of each day (Little 2001, Little 2008). ASER India 2011 also reports that their class 2 was found to be sitting with one or more classes in 58% of the primary and upper primary schools. In Jammu and Kashmir, Jharkhand and Meghalaya, more than 80% of observed grade 2 and grade 4 classrooms in primary schools were multigrade (ASER India 2011).

Multigrade teaching in Pakistan

**Chart 1:** Percentage of schools in which Class 2 is sitting with other classes (ASER 2011)

Our study depicts that multigrade teaching has a negative effect on students’ performance. In our schools mostly there is a shortage of teachers, which results in merging of different grades to cater the students and maintain discipline. But we see that this results in poor performance of students. *Punjab Education Assessment System (PEAS) 2011.*

In Pakistan, little or no attention is paid to this phenomenon. A specific number of teachers are assigned to a school and if that number results to be inadequate to the requirements of the school, multigrade teaching results. In some cases a single teacher is appointed to cope with any number of children who may attend the school thus making multigrade teaching inevitable. Another problem that arises is that teachers do not want to get appointed to remote villages hence they use political patronage to avoid transfers. In some cases it has also been observed that head teachers artificially over represent the student strength in their schools to avoid getting her teachers being transferred to other schools. The reason being that the government tends to transfer teachers from schools which have low student strength to other schools where either there are no teachers or inadequate number of teachers. All these factors tend to exacerbate multi-grade teaching. However, in official records there are no multigrade schools. Due to this the specific needs of such schools remain unmet. Multigrade teaching in Pakistan is not a result of a proactive approach to dealing with the failing education system in the country but is more of de facto solution to the incapacity or inability of the system to cater to the education needs of the country.

As the system has turned a blind eye towards this reality, the information required to effectively work within such a setup is not sufficiently reflected in the curriculum or the teaching methods nor is it dealt with in content and pedagogy of teacher training courses. Teachers

Table 1: Average number of rooms used for classes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Govt. Primary Schools</th>
<th>Govt. Elementary Schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>National</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punjab</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sindh</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khyber Pakhtunkhwa</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>7.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Balochistan</td>
<td>2.1</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gilgit Baltistan</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Azad Jammu Kashmir</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FATA</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Challenges of Multigrade teaching

The number of classrooms used for teaching in each province can be one of the reasons of the observed high percentage of multigrade schooling in the respective provinces in Pakistan. In Sindh, 65% of schools have a multigrade setup. Corresponding number of rooms available for teaching purposes at the primary level is 1.8, which means that at most two rooms are available for teaching 5 different grade levels. From these statistics it can be inferred that teachers are teaching across grades each day. Depending on the enrollment levels a teacher may be responsible for teaching at least 60 students at a time who are spread across grade levels. Teachers in this context are faced with the challenge of delivering a curriculum which has been designed for mono-grade classes to a multi-grade class. It is apparent in this case that either the teacher will be focusing on a single grade level while other students are neglected or she may be trying her best to teach all grades at the same but her efforts would be in vain as without proper training and resource materials she would not be able to achieve much. Without proper training and learning materials it is unfair to expect from teachers to cover the full curricula and assessment procedures in a multigrade class as if it was monograde.

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currently in the system are completely ineffectual when it comes to multigrade teaching. Not only is this creating problem in terms of learning competencies of the students but is also destroying the incentive structure of the teachers to teach. Multigrade teaching requires more time and effort on part of the teacher. However, there exist no additional incentives for teachers to take positions in multigrade teaching situations in remote rural areas as compared to similarly trained teachers being appointed to established regions.

In Pakistan there is no concept of multigrade teaching and no special professional preparation. Teacher Training courses are provided based on the special needs of the primary school teachers who teach five classes from I - V in remote and inaccessible areas. Generally those teachers who possess the Primary Teacher Certificate (PTC) courses are appointed for teaching at multigrade learning schools. They acquire the strategies and techniques of teaching in multigrade schools through experience and experimentation. UNESCO/APEiD  

Policy Recommendations

- Chapman and Adams (2002) suggest that first and foremost, multigrade teaching should be officially recognized as a mode of teaching so that schools are then operated under specific multigrade regulations (different from mono-grade schools). Once officially accepted as a specific form of teaching, the education department will automatically try and start to understand the extent and nature of the needs of multigrade schools, which previously they assumed were non-existent or not enough in magnitude to be worth paying any attention.

- Policy makers and education planners must acquaint themselves with the potential benefits of multigrade teaching in achieving EFA and MDG goals especially in face of resource constraints.

- Pre and in service teacher training should be modified to include relevant training for multigrade teaching. Teachers should be prepared for this eventuality as multigrade teaching is a necessity in the current education system of the country.

- The national curricula and other resource materials should be redesigned in light of multigrade teaching. The curriculum structure and content should be amended and reorganized in a manner that would support the multigrade teacher in its delivery without compromising the overall curriculum objectives of achieving the associated minimum competencies of each grade level.

- In case the government does not want to adopt multi-grade teaching as a  

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