
Multi-grade teaching

The key to successful mixed ability teaching and multi-grade teaching is to move responsibility for learning from the teacher to the pupils.

(C. Berry, 1995)

In many of the small islands of the Caribbean and in remote areas in the larger countries, teachers are required to teach multi-grade classes. These teachers often do not receive any special training and teacher educators at the seminar expressed the need for the inclusion in teacher education programmes of a component that will enable teachers to develop the special skills required for multi-grade teaching.

What is multi-grade teaching?

This refers to a situation where one teacher has two or more year groups (grades) in one class. It is described by a variety of names, including:

- multi-class teaching
- multi-level teaching
- composite class teaching
- vertical group teaching
- family class teaching
- unitary schooling (where there is a one teacher school).

Multi-grade teaching should be distinguished from mono-grade teaching (one teacher – one grade). However, it is useful to bear in mind that in most mono-grade situations, classrooms contain students of a wide range of abilities. Also, where repetition is common, mono-grade classrooms can contain students of a wide age range. It is therefore true to say that good multi-grade teaching approaches are also good classroom practice in general.

Consequently, many of the comments relating to effective classroom practice which follow can be applied equally well to both multi-grade and mixed ability classrooms. The 1993 Caricom Report, *The Future of Education in the Caribbean*, recognised a fundamental weakness in teaching practice when it stated:

'The use of "chalk and talk" in teacher dominated classrooms, a situation which is perpetuated by traditional approaches to the training of primary school teachers, diminishes opportunities for pupil-initiated questions and the development of thinking skills.' (p. 10)

The key to successful mixed ability teaching and multi-grade teaching is to move responsibility for learning from the teacher to the pupils. This is

difficult to achieve in classrooms dominated by teacher-led content. Some of the ways in which practice can be improved will be explored later.

Attitudes towards multi-grade organisation

Three basic positions can be identified towards multi-grade situations:

- 1 Strong positive – Multi-grade teaching is the best approach to grouping children for both pedagogical and social reasons. It is superior to non-grade grouping. This position is taken by the Escuela Nueva Project in Colombia.
- 2 Weak positive – Multi-grade classes can be organised so as to achieve results at least comparable with mono-grade classes, at less cost and with an increase in student access. This characterises the Zambian approach to multi-grade teaching.
- 3 Negative – multi-grade classes are an unfortunate demographic necessity which lower quality and are difficult to teach. This is probably the most common view, particularly in developing countries.

Although it must be treated with caution, research evidence does not tend to show that multi-grade organisation lowers quality. In the Turks and Caicos Islands, for example, a 1994 review of the education system concluded that an analysis of data from the Transfer Test did not 'support the commonly held notion that multi-grade schools offer poorer quality education compared to other types of school organisation' (p.58). In fact, some research indicates that multi-grade organisation, when accompanied by effective classroom practice, can produce superior results to mono-grade classrooms.

However, the negative perception of multi-grade organisation, which is often held by educational administrators, teachers, and the public alike, is both persistent and pernicious. It needs to be seriously challenged, not least because attention to classroom effectiveness in multi-grade settings can also have a positive spin-off in mono-grade classrooms, for example, in terms of classroom organisation and resource provision.

The situation in the Turks and Caicos Islands

It is probably fair to say that multi-grade organisation is seen as a demographic necessity in the Turks and Caicos Islands. Some multi-grade schools historically have excellent reputations depending on the particular teacher in charge, but by and large the prevailing view is that a multi-grade setting is inferior to a mono-grade one.

There are multi-grade schools on two islands, both with declining populations, and in one small community with a relatively stable population according to the 1990 census. The populations on the two islands involved have both shown a steady decline since 1960. This can be seen in Figure 12.

At present, the government is committed to retaining primary schools on these islands, but if populations continue to fall, this may not be feasible. Presently (1994), Salt Cay Primary School has 27 students in Grades 1-6 with two teachers and Middle Caicos has 30 with two teachers. The third school involved currently has an enrolment of 59 pupils with three teachers. The overall position as regards multi-grade teaching in the Turks and Caicos

Figure 12 The population of Salt Cay and Middle Caicos: 1960–1990

Island	1960	1970	1980	1990
Salt Cay	448	334	284	211
Middle Caicos	532	362	396	272

Islands can be seen in Figure 12. Although the incidence of multi-grade teaching is not high in the Turks and Caicos Islands (as compared, for example, to Kiribati in the Pacific where approximately 50 per cent of the student population is in multi-grade classes), it still merits attention because the poor image of multi-grade schools makes it difficult to recruit teachers for them and these schools are likely to continue in the foreseeable future.

The problems and advantages of multi-grade teaching

In the recent survey of multi-grade teachers in the Turks and Caicos Islands, several advantages and problems were identified. These are basically in accord with the problems and advantages outlined by Collingwood in his 1991 book *Multiclass Teaching in Primary Schools*. As such, they are probably common to all teachers in multi-grade settings. Many of the problems stem from the common teacher perception that multi-grade classes are best taught as two or more separate grade levels. As will be seen, this is not necessarily the case.

The teacher

The teacher can adopt a number of techniques which will enhance his/her performance as a multi-grade teacher. Some of these are as follows:

1 Careful lesson planning:

Many teachers complain that they have problems with classroom organisation and discipline. Often, these problems arise from 'dead time' in the classroom when students are not engaged on a task. Dead time can be minimised if teachers plan rigorously. Teachers need to be attentive to allocating sufficient time to the achievement of objectives, maximising student time on task, and dividing their time equitably among student groups.

2 Timetabling

Different timetabling options need to be explored for multi-grade teaching. Some of the options include: subject staggering (subjects which require more teacher-pupil interaction are grouped with those which require less); subject grouping (subjects which lend themselves to vertical grouping are presented to all grades at same time); common timetable (same subject is presented at same time, but at different grade levels); integrated day (pupils work independently on what interests them).

3 Type of task

Some activities lend themselves better to pupils with a wide range of abilities than others. Such activities tend to be open-ended and can be tackled at different levels of sophistication. Also, multi-grade teachers should be aware of the value of graded exercises which become progressively more difficult.

4 Self-directed learning

In a multi-grade class, it is essential that students work independently some of the time to allow the teacher time with individuals or another sub-group. In order to do this, students need access to self-instructional materials, exercises prepared by the teacher, and an adequate classroom library.

5 Peer tutoring

Students can act as teacher both within and across grade levels. Such tutoring can either be structured or incidental. One example of peer tutoring is paired reading. Peer tutoring gives the teacher an opportunity to give attention to a sub-group or to monitor progress of individual students.

6 Assessment and feedback

It is important for the teacher to monitor closely individual student progress in key subjects. Otherwise, it will be difficult to set self-directed learning tasks at an appropriate level. Monitoring could take the form of pupil profiling or pupil self-assessment. However, close monitoring may not be easy to implement in some systems. In the survey of primary teachers in the Turks and Caicos Islands, for example, less than half of those questioned said that they regularly kept a record of individual pupil progress in Mathematics.

7 Learning environment

Teachers of multi-grade classes often complain that it is difficult to proceed because of distractions and interruptions. Multi-grade teachers need to create an environment in which pupils know exactly what is expected of them at different stages in a lesson. Establishing set routines is very helpful in this regard.

The classroom

1 Space

Because good multi-grade teaching is characterised by a variety of grouping techniques, it is important that the classroom environment allows the teacher sufficient space to move pupils and furniture and to monitor group activity. Space allocation of 1.5 square metres per student has been suggested (as reported in Thomas and Shaw).

2 Classroom library

In a successful multi-grade classroom, some students need to work independently while the classroom teacher works with another group. A classroom library is a vital tool to promote independent learning. Libraries should contain both fiction and non-fiction. In order to minimise the workload for the teacher, classroom libraries can be organised by the pupils themselves.

These can be an appropriate textbook, materials produced by the individual teacher, or materials produced at in-service workshops. Worksheets can be laminated to make them durable.

4 Groupings

Different pupil arrangements are essential if a multi-grade classroom is to be successful. Some possibilities are: same ability; mixed ability; same age/year group or social groups. A variety of groupings may be required within one lesson for example, whole class presentation, followed by small group activity, followed by whole class discussion.

Regional initiatives

Depending on the country concerned, regional and national initiatives may be conflated. In the Turks and Caicos Islands, for example, scale and centralisation have meant that there are very few regional initiatives. Also some of the national initiatives may be more appropriate to Caribbean regional action.

1 Resource centres

These can be a useful support for multi-grade teachers who will need to meet frequently to share ideas. Resource centres can also provide the base for materials production and in-service training. Resource centres should contain teacher reference books as well as facilities for materials production. If possible, a resource centre should be managed by someone who can give instructional leadership.

2 Pedagogical advice

A system should be in place whereby advisors visit schools on a regular basis to offer methodological and pedagogical support to teachers. This should not be confused with inspection visits, which, while important, should be kept separate where possible from advisory support.

3 Administrative support

Ensure that remote multi-grade schools have proper administrative support, for example, maintenance for/and delivery of textbooks.

4 Community/school ties

Encourage schools to develop effective Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs). Because multi-grade schools are usually in the smallest communities, a successful school is one which involves the public.

National initiatives

1 Teacher training

Where necessary, teachers should be prepared for the realities of multi-grade and mixed ability teaching through courses in multi-grade teaching on pre-service teacher training courses.

Few training programmes prepare teachers for working in a multi-grade environment. The result is too often that when faced with a multi-grade class, teachers perform as though they were teaching several independent classes – lecturing to one grade while the others remain idle. Time on task is reduced, achievements fall, discipline degenerates, the teacher becomes frustrated and feels overworked. Inclusion of multi-grade teaching techniques in training programmes can give the teachers the skills they need to effectively manage a complex classroom environment. These skills can be useful for the large numbers of teachers who will find themselves in multi-grade classrooms, as well as for single grade teachers, who will find that many multi-grade techniques will improve their own teaching. (Thomas and Shaw, p.27).

In addition, because multi-grade teaching is particularly challenging, it is important to ensure that all teachers in multi-grade schools are trained teachers.

2 Curriculum development

Curricula are also required to enable multi-grade teachers to adopt more innovative teaching techniques. Such curricula should be flexible enough to allow pupils to work at different levels in the same class. One possibility is a modular curriculum, in which one module is completed at the pupil's own pace before moving on to the next one. These curriculum development activities can also be of benefit to mixed ability classes in mono-grade schools.

3 Self-instructional materials

Publishers should also be encouraged to produce textbooks which can be accessed easily. In addition, the production of teacher-made materials should be promoted.

4 In-service support

A national programme of in-service support for all teachers, ensuring that the needs of multi-grade teachers are not overlooked, is also desirable.

Conclusion

Knowledge of the incidence of multi-grade teaching in the Caribbean as a whole, and the measures that are currently in place to support teachers in multi-grade settings would be useful in informing further work in this area. If implemented fully, measures to improve multi-grade teaching can result in significant improvements in student achievement. However, a successful programme of multi-grade development needs support at all levels of the educational system and needs to be consistently applied. In addition, a concerted effort is required to convince some administrators and teachers, and the public that multi-grade teaching is not a second class option. This is critical if effective administrative and classroom approaches are to be adopted and implemented in multi-grade classrooms.