The Possibilities and Challenges of Multigrade Teaching in Rural Pakistan

Ali Nawab*
Salima Rahim Baig

Faculty Members
The Aga Khan University-Institute for Educational Development
Professional Development Centre, Chitral
Email: alinawab@pdcc.edu.pk*

Statement

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Abstract

In rural Pakistan instruction frequently occurs in multigrade settings where, due to lack of teachers and space, two to three teachers teach six classes. Manyteachers lack the knowledge and skills to manage multigrade classes effectively as they have been trained for single-grade teaching. Thisqualitative study was conducted to explore the possibilities and challenges of implementing multigrade course strategies in four project schools. Based on the findings of the study, this paper argues that multigrade courses have positive impact upon the teaching learning practices of schools. However, government has to play a key role in sustaining the implementation and impact of multigrade course strategies.

Key Words: Multi-grade teaching, Pakistan, public school, rural context

Introduction

As a sub unit of Aga Khan University-Institute for Educational Development (AKU-IED), Professional Development Centre, Chitral[1] (PDCC) has been working in Chitral since 2003. PDCC is committed to work closely with its partner organizations i.e. government education department, the Aga Khan Education Service, Pakistan, the private education sector and other NGOs. The focus of PDCC's activities is on improving the quality of teaching and learning in schools through development of teachers, head teachers and other stakeholders. PDCC intends to design and implement professional development courses and school improvement programs based on the needs of the context, schools and teachers. One of such contextually relevant course designed by PDCC is School Improvement in Multigrade Situation (SIMS) course. The major partners of PDCC have multigrade setting; two to three teachers teach six classes. Due to the shortage of teachers and space, two or more grades are accommodated in one classroom. A teacher teaches one group and then moves to the other group. In this way, though the setting is multigrade, the grades are taught separately. When the teacher teaches one group, the other group remains idle, either with no activities or the activities which do not keep them engaged in meaningful learning as they are given no worthwhile tasks to do. While we agree that the beginning years of learners have tremendous impact upon their later careers, these students enter middle level with low background which adversely affects their overall career.

Despite the intensity of the issue, government has not taken any initiative to deal with the multigrade situation. PDCC highly realizes the issue and to tackle the situation, PDCC has developed an indigenous model SIMS which aims at improving the current multigrade teaching situation in schools through enhancing teachers' content knowledge and improving their pedagogical skills especially in multigrade teaching. The earlier studies (Khan, 2006) conducted in the context had revealed that SIMS model has positive impact upon the school practices. However, such studies were action research where the researchers were working with the teachers to support them in the implementation of the SIMS course ideas. The need of an in-depth study was felt to understand how the teachers do without any formal support from the facilitators and what were the possibilities and challenges of implementing SIMS course strategies in the project schools. This paper presents the findings of a study conducted in SIMS project schools and explains the possibilities and challenges of implementing SIMS course ideas and strategies in the school context.

Multigrade Teaching

Multigrade teaching refers to teaching children in a setting in whicha single teacher has sole responsibility for two or more grade of students simultaneously (Birch &Lally, 1995; Hargreaves, 2001).

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[1] Chitral is the Northern and mountainous district of Khyber Pukhtunkhwa Province, Pakistan

A number of terms such as multigrade, mixed year, combination class, vertical grouping, family grouping composite class, split class, double-graded class and unitary schools' are used across the world to describe multigrade situations (Berry & Little, 2006). Multigrade contextsvary from country to country. In some countries like Nepal, a single teacher teaches more than one level together where the classroom may be different or same. In Malaysia, a teacher accommodates two or more levels in one classroom and teaches them together. In Pakistan, sometimes, more than three levels are grouped in one classroom and taught by a sing teacher (Birch &Lally, 1995). Various conditions result in the adoption of multigrade teaching. Little (2006) and Mathot (2001) mention a number of such factors. In some areas, especially those of low population density, schools are widely scattered and due to low enrolment, a single or two teachers become responsible forteachingstudents at different levels. Similarly, in a context in whichstudent enrolment is high, but there areshortages of teachers and classrooms, more than one levelmay beaccommodated in a single classroom and taught by a single teacher. Though multigrade situation exists in a number of countries due to various reasons, during the pre-service and in-service course, the teachers are not provided with the skill required to manage and teach multigrade classes (Mathot, 2001).

However, several scholars argue the importance of full support to multigrade setting. Vithanapathirana (2006) believes that if multigrade teaching is to be implemented effectively, it needs to be introduced to initial and continuingeducation courses. Similarly, Mathot (2001) argues that the government should establish a special unit to support multigrade classes, and multigrade settings should be given due status and recognition. Multigrade instruction is not always done out of necessity. Rather in some situations it is often considered a better option than single-grade instruction. Research conducted onmultigrade teaching has suggested that learners in such settings perform equally or even better from their counterparts ofsinglegrade setting. However, when it comes to student achievements, the students in multigrade setting out-perform single-grade students (Miller, 1990). Similarly, due to shortage of time, students in multigrade setting are usually given responsibilities for their own assessment which gives them opportunities to enhance their learning and achievements (Hargreaves, 2001).

In such situation, the junior students haveopportunities to learn from senior students while senior students have opportunities to review and revise the concepts which they have already been taught. Mathot (2001) believes that in multigrade settings students bring various diverse strengths to these classes. Such strengthsinclude age, ability, developmental level, background, experience, motivation and interest. Moreover, students bring in rich experience from other learning situations outside school (Ames, 2006). A multigrade teacher should appreciate these diversities and experiences and expose learners to such activities where these diversities could be usedas learning opportunities. Reciprocal teaching is considered an important instructional approach which encourages students to provide instructional support for each other (Veenman, 1995). Miller (1991) discusses the responsibilities of multigrade teacher and the environment of multigrade classroom:

> The multigrade teacher must be well organized and put in much preparation time. Educators have much to learn from these teachers about classroom management and instructional organization. The multigrade classroom is an environment where routines are clearly understood and followed. Students learn to be self-directed learners, often working alone or in small groups. They must also be able to help others and serve as positive role models. A supportive, family-like atmosphere often must be developed, one in which cooperation and solidarity among all students predominates. Without these elements, a multigrade teacher could not manage the vast variability in student needs. (p10)

In developing context such as Pakistan, the approach to teaching in multigrade setting is that two or more levels are accommodated in one classroom and a teacher teaches one level and then moves to the other level engaging the first group in some activity such as reading. Though this also is one approach to multigrade teaching, it is not consistent with the actual spirit of multigrade instruction in which teachers integrate the similar or related concepts/themes across contents of different levels. According to Birch and Lally (1995), integration may beof two types; integration of pupils from different grades and competencies, and integration of the curriculum by subjects, range of subjects or topics. Birch and Lally (1995) are of the opinion that such integration is challenging for primary school teachers as they need to know the contents of various subjects across the various levels. The teacher is required to have command over all subjects he/she has to teach in multigrade setting. Since all the concepts of a subject of different levels may not be integrated, the teachers have to face a number of challenges in this regard. In countries where the curriculum has been designed for single-grade instruction, it is a challenging task for teachers to integrate concepts while teaching in multigrade setting. Once grouped together and the related themes integrated, the two levels sit together and read the same subject at a time and then move to the other subject as the school timetable are designed in this manner. On contrary to single-grade instruction, in multigrade setting, the two levels sit together asone level.

The teacher, as Little (2001) mentions, prepares activities where both grades can work together and the amount of grade related sequential work is reduced. The teacher has almost the same or slightly different objectives for both levels. He/she may expect something of higher level of the theme from the upper level and occasionally the teacher may have some different objectives for different levels. However, both the levels are provided equal opportunities to learn and practice the concept in hand. Birch and Lally (1995) discuss a case of multigrade teaching Pakistan. According to them, in Pakistan a concept-based approach to integration had been carried out to reduce the number of subjects taught in class one to three. The subjects of Science, Social Studies and Islamiatwereintegrated with Urdu. But this approach failed due to a number of reasons. First, the subject of Social Studies includes knowledge and information about specific provinces and districts while only one textbook was not applicable to all the contexts. Second, the concepts to be introduced in Science of class two were too difficult to integrate and teach with other subjects.

Though multigrade setting still exists in Pakistani context, the approach of government to such setting has not been satisfactory especially in the rural context. A teacher trained for single-grade teaching is given the responsibility of teaching in multigrade setting. The training of teachers should be according to the place and the realities of the context where the teacher is supposed to teach (White & Reid, 2008). Research suggests that multigrade classrooms are more complex and demanding. As Miller (1991) observes, "the multigrade classroom is not for the timid, inexperienced, or untrained teacher" (p.11).   This study examines the possibilities and challenges of implementing a multigrade teacher training course for teachers in rural Pakistan in the northern province of Chitral, offered through the Aga Khan University-Institute for Educational Development. Since there is multigrade setting in the primary schools, the course aims at enhancing the pedagogical skills of teacher with particular focus on multigrade teaching. Thus, the course contents include the concept of multigrade teaching, integrating related concepts from different subjects, developing lesson plans, classroom management, peer tutoring, developing and using teaching aids, and writing reflections. Moreover, the participants were also given opportunity to develop lesson plans for multigrade teaching and to demonstrate them in the training venue to get feedback from the course facilitators.

Research Method

In Pakistan private sector schools provide English-medium education and possess adequateresources. Therefore, private schools are better options for parents and mostly affluent people send their children to these schools. However, the majority of the population cannot afford the expenses of private schools and thus, send their children to public schools where they get free education. However, public schools lack both material and human resources. In primary schools, there are usually three teachers teaching six grades ranging from Nursery to class 5. Coupled with the shortage of teachers, there is lack of space and the six grades are accommodated in three classroom; two grades in each class. Therefore, in almost all primary schools in the context of Chitral, there is multigrade situation. Moreover, they have Urdu-medium instructions. The achievements of private school students are higher compared to public school students due to the attention of parents and teachers, availability of resources and English-medium instruction. Since private schools afford individual teachers for individual classes, the multigrade setting is pertinent to public sector and Aga Khan Education Services Schools[2]. The schools for this study had been selected from these two sectors. Two schools were taken from each sector. These schools were selected based on severalcriteria. First, there were three teachers in each school teaching six grades ranging from Nursery to class 5.

In each school, the six grades had been accommodated in three classrooms. Second, two teachers from each of these schools had attended the SIMS course. Third, during the process of data collection in the pre-intervention as well as during the process of multigrade teacher training course, the teachers of these schools were found the best options to be research participants as they were active and responsive. Last, these schools were accessible to the researchers while due to geographical and climatic conditions of this mountainous area, some schools remain inaccessible especially in winter season. The major participants of this study were the eight teachers coming from the four selected schools. However, in order to further enrich the data, from each school, the teacher who had not attended the course was also interviewed. In some cases, they were the in-charge teachers while in some cases they were teachers as the in-charge teacher had come to attend the course. Moreover, at least three parents were also interviewed. These parents were coming from the nearby households of the schools and their children were coming to these schools. In order to study the possibilities and challenges of implementingthecourse strategies, a baseline survey was conducted in the target schools where the teachers were supposed to attend the multigrade course.

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[2] Aga Khan Education Services Schools are schools financed and run by the Aga Khan Development Network, an Islamic international NGO.

In this baseline survey, data were collected through observation of school practices including teaching learning processes, seating arrangement, classroom management and overall school culture. Moreover, through informal discussions with the teachers, data were collected regardingteacher instructional and learning practices. Before the commencement of the course, two teachers each from four schools were formally interviewed in the venue through semi structured interview. The interviews focused on teacherunderstandings of multigrade teaching and teaching learning practices. These teachers were then closely observed throughout the course to follow their progress and to understand the change in their perceptions and practices. Just after the course, the target teachers were interviewed again to know the extent to which they have been reoriented. Moreover, the teachers were asked to write regular reflections during the course and these reflections were also analyzed. When the teachers returned to their contexts and started implementing the course strategies, the course facilitators visited them on the field to observe the possibilities and challenges of implementing the course ideas and to provide on the spot support to the teachers. Similarly, they were interviewed on the field to know their experience of teaching in multigrade setting using the strategies acquired from the SIMS course. Other stakeholders including school in-chargeteachers, students and parents were also interviewed to enrich data about the case. The researchers also analyzed relevant documents such as modified schedules, integrated concept grids, and teachers reflective diaries.

Findings

Based on the analysis of collected data, the findings are discussed under four major themes namely, perception of teachers, teaching learning practices, impact upon students and impact upon the teachers.

Perception of Teachers

During the baseline data collection, the researchers observed that in multigrade setting, the teachers were teaching two levels separately, e.g. teaching one level and then moving to the other level. During this transition, the one group is supposed to either sit silently so that the other group may not be disturbed or they be engaged in some silent reading activity. Similarly, in the pre-interview, the teachers were collectively of the opinion that accommodating two levels in one room and teaching these levels one by one was multigrade teaching. "I teach one level, give them some activity and then teach the other group", a trainee teacher responded in the pre-interview. Since the teachers had been trained in singlegrade teaching, they were not familiar with the concept of multigrade teaching. A drastic change occurred in the understanding of the trainee teachers as they went through the concept of multigrade during the workshop. The teachers were found actively engaged in developing concept grid and demonstrating the concept during the micro teaching. Their understanding of multigrade teaching was also visible from the reflections which they were writing on the daily basis. In the post interview, it was interesting and encouraging to note that the teachers had developed a totally different view of multigrade teaching.

While telling about his understanding of multigrade as acquired from the course, a trainee teacher said, "For me multigrade teaching was accommodating two levels in one classroom and teaching them separately. Now I have realized that multigrade is something different. It is more about integrating related concepts of two levels and then teaching them in mixed groups". It reveals that the SIMS course had positive impact upon the understanding of teachers with regard to multigrade teaching and they had been reoriented through presenting multigrade teaching as an approach where two levels could be taught as one group. Similarly, an important aspect of multigrade teaching is developing concept grids, and the teachers were found acquiring this skill as they developed sample concept grids during the workshop for their respective schools. Though they had developed satisfactory understanding of multigrade teaching and acquired the relevant strategies and skills, it was uncertain how teachers would implement the strategies in the classroomcontext and what challenges they would face in the implementation process. In order to answer these questions, we followed them in the school context.

Teaching Learning Practices

Though the teachers had demonstrated their understanding of multigrade in micro teaching at the end of the workshop as well as in the post interviews, the possibilities and challenges of implementing their knowledge and skills in real context was not certain yet. When the research team visited them in schools to reveal the extent to which the teachers were able to implement training strategies, it was encouraging to note that a number of initiatives had been taken inside the schools. Such initiatives and changes in the teaching learning practices are discussed under concept grids, seating arrangement, classroom activities, displays and use of no-cost resources.

Concept Grids

The most important requirement of multigrade teaching is development of concept grids where similar or related concepts of similar subjects in two levels are integrated.

During the workshop, the teachers had been given the idea and skill of developing concept grids and it was encouraging to see that the teachers had developed concept grids for the levels which they had integrated. They displayed the concept grids in their respective classrooms. However, in some schools, the teachers relatedthat it was very challenging for them to develop concept grid especially for English subjects. "When we look at the titles of the lessons, we do not find any similarity between them", a trainee teacher told the research team. Through pondering deeper into the matter, we came to know that none of the teachers from this school had worked in English team when they were developing concept grids during the workshop. Like other subjects, they were looking for similar concepts in the titles of the books while during the workshop the English team had been given the idea that in English they have to integrate skills of language. The teachers having this difficulty were worked with again in the field and a sample concept grid was developed and the teachers started enriching the concept grid.

The concept grid also contains objectives as well as teaching and learning activities which makes the teachers work easily and systematically. A teacher remarked, "Though it is very challenging to develop concept grid but once we develop it, we have not to be worried about lesson plans as the concept grid contains all the objectives and activities for both classes". Moreover, the teachers who have not been through multigrade course, teach in multigrade setting following the concept grid. "Though we do not know much about multigrade teaching, we follow the teachers who have attended your course and we learn a lot from them about teaching in multigrade setting", a teacher who has not attended multigrade course remarked. It reveals that some of the untrained and interested teachers learn the skill of multigrade from the teachers who have attended multigrade course.

Seating Arrangements

As observed during the pre-intervention stage, two levels had been accommodated in one classroom but both the levels were sitting separately and the teachers were teaching one level and then the other level. "When I am teaching one level the other level is supposed to be silent, otherwise it is disturbing for the level where I am teaching", a teacher had commented during the pre-intervention interview. When the teachers returned attending the workshop, they made both the levels sit together in mixed groups. When the teacher was doing some presentation, the students were sitting in circle and when the students were given some activities, they were sitting in groups of five or six. Only one blackboard was used and all the students were facing this blackboard unlike the pre-intervention period where both the levels were sitting in opposite direction. Both the teachers and students were happy with the new seating arrangement. "When I was teaching one level, it was too difficult for me to keep control on the other level while now I enjoy teaching as both the levels sit together and I engage both the levels at a time", a trainee teacher commented. When the levels were sitting separately, it was not only a wasteof time as studentswere sitting idly, but also a challenge for teachers to keep the other level busy or silent. Now the teachers have not to be worried about the other level as they are sitting together and the teacher is able to give them full attention. Even the students are happy with this situation. Students and teachersjointly relatethat in the present situation students learn from one another and get engaged in interesting activities such as group work, presentation etc.

Classroom Activities

Prior to the multigrade workshop, the teachers were used to the traditional ways of teaching; reading the text, translating it and then writing the meanings of some new words on the blackboard. This method was applied for almost all subjects. After the workshop, the teachers realized that each subject has specific aims and different teaching strategies. Moreover, they have realized that teaching does not go inone direction. Rather students bring enough experience and previous knowledge with them. "It is a great learning for me that students possess good previous knowledge and when I act upon this concept, the lesson becomes interesting for students as they get confidence when they bring in their own knowledge to some situation", a trainee teacher told the research team. Now they could be observed working as facilitator in the classroom and students could be found engaged in various activities. Students are given opportunities to work in group or pair, actively share their ideas and present their work to the whole class. In this way, students are not passive recipientsof knowledge. Rather they actively contribute .

Classroom Displays

Except a few ready-made charts, there were no displays in the classroom. Nothing had been developed by the students or they had not been displayed in the classroom as observed during the pre-intervention stage. While entering the same classrooms at the post intervention stage, classrooms were found artistically decorated with the tasks of students. Displaying the tasks of students had been a challenge for teachers as they used to complain about the space to display students' tasks. The teachers had thought of creative ways to display such tasks now.

They had pasted a big piece of cloth to the wall and all the tasks of students had easily and systematically been displayed on this piece of cloth. Moreover, the teachers had tied long pieces of thread from wall to wall and these threads were also used to displays students' tasks. In some schools, separate folders had been developed for each student using locally available resources. Placed on walls inside classrooms, these folders contain ongoing assessment records of the respective students. Such displays have tremendous impact upon the interest and motivation of students. They refer to the specific displays and claim their ownership. The same displays were used to review previous lessons taught in the classroom.

Impact upon Students

The ultimate aim of bringing improvement in school practices is to enhance the learning outcomes of students as they are the focus of any reforms. As a result of improvement in classroom teaching practices, a number of positive impacts were visible upon students. Before intervention, the students were found hesitating in responding to the questions of observers. Now they are more confident and enthusiastic. Whenever some question is posed to them, everyone wants to respond. They become enthusiastic to talk more and more to the observers. When they have to present any task to the whole class, they enjoy doing so and everyone wants that he or should be given the opportunity. Though the students are enthusiastic to come forth, to talk and to take active part in any activity, they have also been trained in following social skills. When they are asked any question, they just raise hands and the one who is referred to answers the question. Similarly, they were found going to the corner of the classroom to erase their pencils in the 'use me' basket. While working in the groups, they were found carefully listening to the person who talks and waiting for their turn with patience. The learners in the project schools have developed keen interest with books. PDC provides library books according to the interest and level of the learners. When the research team visited these schools, the students were asking for more books. "We have read all the books which you had brought. Are you bringing any more books?", the students were asking. PDC also provides some sports goods to the project schools. The students were found playing. In some cases, they want to stay in school even when the schoolis closed. "We send them home after school while they want to stay in school and play some games", a trainee teacher commented. Now the students enjoy their school.

Impact upon Teachers

The SIMS course has also positive impact upon the motivation and attitude of the trainee teachers. They have developed interest for their professional development. Some of the teachers were requesting the research team to include them in any further training. "This course (SIMS course) was really helpful to develop our pedagogical skills and we would appreciate if we are given further opportunities to attend course at PDCC", a trainee teacher suggested. The teachers who have been through the course of SIMS have a very friendly relationship with students. They never get angry to them. Even if the students violate some social skills, they very politely remind them how to behave. It was the friendly and caring nature of the teachers which encourages the learners to freely express themselves in the class and in front of the teachers and observers. Moreover, the teachers are very welcoming for parents. A parent told the research them, "Now we are happy with the teachers as they frequently share the progress of our children with us". Parents also intimated that teachers guide them in providing favourable environment for learners at home. Some of the teachers were writing reflective journals as well. Though their reflections were not of critical and deeper level, still they note down their achievements and challenges and the initiatives which they have started in their respective schools.

Challenges Encountered during the Course and in the School Context

Though the SIMS courses have a number of success stories, there were a number of challenges as well encountered during the course in the venue and in the implementation of the course strategies in the school context. The major challenge faced during the course was the different mediums of the textbooks. In the context of this study, both English and Urdu medium textbooks are used at the primary level. Government schools use Urdu medium textbooks, private schools use English medium textbooks while the Aga Khan Schools use English medium upto class 3 and Urdu medium from class 4 onward. Since teachers from all the three sectors were attending the SIMS course, it was very challenging for the course facilitators to develop concept grids in presence of so many diverse groups. The facilitators tried to focus on the concept and skill of integration whatever the medium of the textbooks was. In ideal situation, two teachers from one school are included in SIMS course to enable them easily implement the concept. In some situations, one teacher was attending the course from a school and it was very challenging for a single teacher to introduce multigrade in a school and to influence other teachers to teach according to the strategies of the trainee teacher. In one of such schools, a teacher who had not attended multigrade course opined, "Multigrade is not a remedy; we need more teachers to run our schools effectively". When such teachers do not favour the concept of multigrade, it is difficult for trainee teachers to influence their perceptions and practices especially when only one teacher attends the course from a school.

Some issues emerge due to the lack of frequent ongoing support to the project schools by PDCC faculty members. Due to the workload and other resource issues, PDCC staff have limited interactions and field based support to the project schools. The teachers implement the course strategies as long as they are followed and supported. When they know that there will be no further support and follow up from PDCC staff, they gradually turn to their previous and easy practices as multigrade needs a lot of hard work and patience. They lack motivation and commitment to carry on the innovative practices without external support. In this way, the sustainability has been a big challenge in this context. Similarly, due to untimely transfer by the government office, in some government schools only one teacher remains there,who has reasonable claim that he/she cannot do something alone as the colleague teacher was transferred.

Conclusion

The above analysis of data gathered from SIMS project schools reveal that the SIMS courses have positive impact upon the school teaching learning practices. However, limited schools and teachers have availed these courses. The major education provider in the context of Chitral is public sector and out of its 636 schools in the district, only 48 school teachers have attended the SIMS course so far. The initial mandate of PDCC was to develop an indigenous model of SIMS keeping in view the multigrade setting at primary level in the context of Chitral especially in government sector. Once such expertise developed, government was supposed to replicate this model in its primary schools. However, the role of government has not been encouraging in this regard. Instead of facilitating its school in multigrade setting, government education office has hindered the process. There are no rewards or encouragement for the teachers who implement multigrade ideas and strategies. Instead of supporting the teachers, government officials evaluate them based on their own criteria such as completion of course and following syllabus set by them.

Moreover, the untimely transfers of multigrade trained teachers further exacerbate the situation. The initiatives of government in developing specialized preparations programmes for teachers of multigrade setting and developing specific selection and staffing policies for multigrade setting would definitely improve the situation (Gibson, 1994). On the other hand, PDCC lack material, human and time resources to provide ongoing support to the teachers. If multigrade setting is to work effectively and efficiently, public sector has to play active and positive role. Otherwise, the multigrade setting will continue working in traditional way where due to the shortage of teachers and space, the students will not get proper attention and learning environment. In this way, the children in this context will move to higher classes without strong background which will influence their whole career and instead of being a productive member of their families as well as our country, they will be extra burden. Thus, we should seriously address the matter as soon as possible if we intend a better career for the upcoming generations.

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