
Multi grade Teaching- Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract

We often come across some primary school, especially in rural and remotely located areas, staffed with one or two teachers. In sparsely populated habitations, due to thin size of enrolment, the number of teachers allotted for the schools is less than the number of grades. This requires action on the part of the available teachers to combine several grades. Primary schools with multi grade teaching are acknowledged for their constraints in several research studies. However, pedagogical concerns, skills and methods required for multi grade teaching situations have different rationale from common situations of mono grade teaching. This paper discusses some strategies for organising teaching-learning in a multi grade context, how to convert multi grade challenges into opportunities and how the teachers should be oriented to teach multi grade classrooms.

Keywords: *Multi grade, Teaching, Challenges, Opportunities.*

Introduction :-

Multi grade teaching is a widely prevailing teaching-learning situation in both the developing as well as the developed countries. Sometimes, such a situation is appreciated as it gives ample opportunities for self-learning, self-assessment, peer learning and good socialisation. This spirit of constructive vision can be better seen in multi grade classrooms where children struggle to learn in their own ways. In a multi grade setting, generally the number of teachers is fewer than the number of classes. Such a situation is observed more in the areas which are either difficult to access or the schools having low enrolment and hence, less number of teachers. Sometimes, multi grade teaching could also arise as a situation in a school having enough teachers. It happens when some teachers are engaged with other school related assignments besides teaching. In such situations remaining teachers are expected to take care of teaching all the classes in the school. A common argument raised against it is that in multi grade, teaching, students, learning suffers as they do not get enough attention and time from the teachers. However, in the garb of this argument, pedagogical arguments have been neglected. There is no dearth of researchers and practitioners who argue that multi grade classrooms should promote child- centered teaching and learning, flexible teaching, a secure classroom environment, freedom of teachers to implement innovative pedagogy and an understanding for individual learning pace. Multi grade teaching becomes challenging as there are children of different ages having varying needs. What has been observed across researches is that there are different types of research findings based on the practices used in multi grade teaching. Handling multi grade classrooms is a skilful assignment for the teachers in context.

Organising Teaching and Learning in a Multi-grade Setting :

Multi-grade contexts vary within the country as well as across countries. In some countries like Nepal, a single teacher teaches more than one grade together, maybe in the same classroom or

different classrooms. In Malaysia also, a teacher accommodates two or more levels in one classroom for the purpose of teaching. In Pakistan, more than three levels are joined together and taught by a single teacher (Birch and Lally, 1995). In India too, the multi grade teaching situation is witnessed by almost all teachers especially in government run primary schools. Even in schools which are otherwise mono grade, the teachers are faced with multi grade situations for various reasons. there are three main teaching-learning strategies that can be adopted in a multi grade classroom situation.

- Students' group formation and subject organising
- Peer tutoring
- Differentiation

Students' Group Formation and Subject Organising :

Organising students in groups created on the basis of various criteria and then engaging them in teaching-learning as per the decided curriculum is a generally followed practice in multi grade set-ups. The sub-categories for this category are based on the definition of multi grade practices proposed by researchers and practitioners. The specific strategies for curriculum transaction under this main category could be as follows.

Parallel curriculum :

In this type of a teaching situation, students share the same themes or subjects but study the syllabus of their respective grade. Each grade is taught turn by turn by the teacher. Suppose there are three Classes—III, IV and V in one classroom and the subject of environmental studies is being taught. If the teacher has adopted the parallel curriculum approach, the teacher will take up a particular theme, say for example, plants. The teacher will discuss the general concepts and other things about the plant which would be relevant and comprehensible to the students of all the three grades. However, the syllabus and textbooks or teaching-learning material would be different for all the classes. Take for example, in Class III, under the theme 'plants', children are supposed to observe different types of plants, including trees and bushes. They should also be allowed to notice different parts of the plants and diversity in different parts such as shapes of leaves, surface of bark, etc. In Class IV, the children are expected to observe the changes taking place in the growth of plants and other processes like photosynthesis. In Class V, children are expected to know about the process of germination, how the plants grow, needs of the plants, etc. Caring for plants and sensitivity towards them is a common concern across classes. In a multi grade classroom, if the teacher is adopting the parallel curriculum approach, the beginning point may be concern, care and importance of plants. Thereafter, the teacher can discuss the observations of children from their daily life experiences, and gradually, the discussion level may get relatively complex to help Class V children know as per their syllabus. Thus students of a particular class would be required to cover the syllabus relevant to them and teachers will take each class turn by turn for specific inputs.

Curriculum rotation :

In this situation, the whole class studies the curriculum of one grade in one year, and the curriculum of the other grade is taught the next year. Thus, children of all the classes are taught together. Taking the same example as given above, there are three types of syllabi for classes III,

IV and V. The syllabus for each class will be taken up turn by turn each year. For example, in first year, class III syllabus may be covered, next year class IV syllabus and then in the following year, class V syllabus is taken up. However, this strategy is not appreciated by practitioners as the learning pace and capacity of children is not same across the grades. For example, for class V child, syllabus of class III is pitched at a relatively lower level of difficulty while for class III child syllabus of class V would be of higher difficulty level.

Spiral curriculum and curriculum alignment :

In this kind of a practice, similar topics are identified in different grade curricula. Students share the same themes. The basic concepts are taught in the lower grade and the same are deepened and expanded in the upper grades. Again, taking the same example of teaching of EVS in classes III, IV and V, the teacher would identify which themes and topics are common across the curricula of the three classes. Food, family, plants are the themes which are generally common across classes III to V. Such topics can be taught to the whole class and then depending upon the syllabi and curricular expectations at different class levels, these topics can be discussed in specific detail in class-wise groups. The teacher may make groups class-wise. Whole class teaching and group teaching can be taken up as per the decision of the teacher

Subjects staggering :

In such kind of a strategy, all grade students study different subjects and each grade is taught by turn. The situation is just like making students of different classes sit together and read their own subjects and syllabus. The teacher takes turns for direct teaching or getting involved with classes individually. Taking the same example, Classes III, IV and V sit in one classroom and children are engaged in their own learning without getting involved with the subject or theme being taught to other two classes. It may happen that children of Class III are studying mathematics, Class IV students are studying language and Class V children are engaged with environmental studies simultaneously.

Whole class teaching :

In this situation, all the classes are taught same subjects at the same time using the same material. Though children belong to different grades, yet there is no differentiation in the teaching, and the same material is supplied to all the children for learning. In such a classroom, the teacher focuses only on the basic competencies and skills which would be helpful to all the children across classes. Generally, this method is used for teaching subjects like music, yoga, sports and art. In all the practices given above, student grouping emerges as the key point in organising teaching learning in multi grade classrooms. The grouping of students as per classes will not be required in the case of whole class teaching as all the classes are combined and teaching is done simultaneously using the same material. In other cases, the teacher decides on grouping arrangements. If the number of students is quite low, the children may be grouped according to grades. In case the number of students is more and the learning pace also varies, the teacher may go for a grouping, based on ability. The group arrangement may keep on changing, depending upon the skills and interest of the teacher.

Peer tutoring :

The second main strategy practised in a multi grade situation is peer tutoring. Peer tutoring can be spontaneous or guided. When children help each other without any prompt or stimulation by the teacher, it is called spontaneous peer tutoring. However, when it emerges as a reaction to the teacher's guidance, it is called guided peer tutoring. Peer tutoring is considered to be beneficial for both sides, the students of higher grades as well as students of lower grades. Peer tutoring may be within the same grade or it could be across different grades. Spontaneous peer tutoring requires a specific environment that can be developed through reduction in control of learning situation by the teacher or by creating situations such as cross age grouping. Teachers, as per research studies, use guided peer tutoring as a teaching strategy. Some teachers take the help of students who complete their task early to help other students who may be facing difficulty in completing their work. Some teachers like to encourage students of higher grade to teach students in a lower grade. The opportunities to develop and utilise peer grouping and tutoring could be many depending upon the visualisation of the teacher.

Differentiation :

The practice of differentiation in teaching is also used by teachers dealing with a multi grade situation. The differentiation could be internal or external. In internal differentiation, the difficulties in the development and background of students are generally taken into account; while in external differentiation, students are grouped on the basis of their achievement level. Differentiation is also created on the basis of the needs of different learners in the classes. The groups created on the basis of differentiation are handled using different practices; for example, giving different assignments, providing remedial teaching and using personal work plan for children, etc.

Converting Multi-grade Situation to an Opportunity for Better Learning :

Necessity may not be considered as the only reason for adopting multi-grade teaching. In many situations, it has been observed that vertical grouping has the potential for better learning than horizontal grouping. Research conducted on multi-grade teaching suggests that learners in such settings perform equally well or even better as they have opportunities to interact and learn from their peers in higher grades. Also, in a multi-grade situation, the teacher's time is distributed among the learners of all grades. Such a shortage of the teacher's available time provides an opportunity to the learners to take up self-assessment and enhance their learning and achievements. The junior students of multi-grade classrooms get chances to learn from the senior students and likewise, the senior students have opportunities to review, revise, and strengthen the concepts which have already been taught to them. Reciprocal teaching, thus, is a good instructional method that encourages students to help from each other and learn. It also supports the good emotional development of young children in primary classes.

Teacher Preparation in a Multi-grade Context:

Despite the intensity of the issue, the stakeholders have not shown enough concern to prepare and update their teachers to handle the challenges of multi-grade teaching nor have they oriented them on managing the classroom by adopting several implementation techniques as per their

situation. This situation calls for the need to research the practices followed in different states and countries to share with teachers a variety of tools and the pedagogy to be undertaken to make multi-grade classrooms effective. Most of the education systems opt for multi-grade teaching as the only option, and in such cases, the quality of teaching-learning becomes very poor. A teacher trained in single class teaching is given the responsibility of teaching in multi-grade settings without providing any kind of specific training for handling more than one class simultaneously. However, the effectiveness of multi grade instructions depends upon the capability and skills of the teacher in planning and implementing teaching learning strategies. Teachers need to work on maximising students' 'time on learning tasks'. The challenge becomes greater for the multi-grade teacher than the mono grade teacher. Miller (1991) suggests that the multi-grade teachers must be well organized and must put in much preparation time. There is much to learn from these teachers about classroom management and instructional organisation. Birch and Lally (1995) expressed that multi-grade teachers need to know the contents of various subjects across different grades they are supposed to handle. Since all the concepts across the grades cannot be integrated, the teachers have to face challenges regularly. In a research study conducted in Pakistan, Nawab and Baig (2011) found that the teachers of multi-grade setting were trained in teaching single grades. Hence, they were not familiar with the concept of multi-grade teaching. However, a drastic change was observed in the trainee teachers while they were engaged in workshops on teaching-learning in multi-grade contexts. They were found to be actively engaged in developing the concept grid and demonstrating the concept. Their understanding was also visible from the reflections they were writing on a daily basis. However, proper implementation of training inputs in classrooms also remains a concern as evidenced by a number of research studies. In the same study, the research team expressed satisfaction as they observed many changes that had undergone in the teaching-learning methodologies; the most important among them was the development of a concept grid.

Conclusion :

The discussion above reveals that multi-grade teaching can be a challenge, but at the same time, it has a potential to get converted into an interesting opportunity, benefitting both the children and the teachers. In many places, multi grade classrooms are not treated as the last resort to manage classes in a particular school. To have a childcentric approach, sometimes vertical grouping yields better results than horizontal grouping as it provides more learning opportunities through social interaction of children in different grade groups. However, in order to streamline teaching-learning processes in a multi grade context, the government education departments need to step in. The initiatives of government in developing specialised training courses for a multi-grade setting and providing regular support to teachers in such a context would definitely improve the situation. Otherwise, multi grade schools will continue working in their old style, implying that due to shortage of teachers and space, students would not get proper attention and learning environment.

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