

# **History, Status Quo and Prospects of Multi-grade Instruction in Rural Areas**

**(Abstract)**

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Multi-grade instruction has had a history of hundreds of years in China and in contemporary period it has been indispensable for the implementation of the nine-year compulsory education in remote mountainous and grassland areas. At present, with the rapid economic development, quickening urbanization and migration of rural population in China, the number of school-age children is decreasing in some areas. Besides, with the implementation of the nine-year compulsory education,

school distribution has been readjusted, i.e. smaller schools have been merged into bigger ones and multi-grade instruction has undergone a corresponding reduction. Under these circumstances, the development and reform of multi-grade instruction are confronted with many new problems.

## **I. Historical Contribution Made by Multi-grade Instruction**

1. Multi-grade instruction has played a significant role in promoting primary schooling, raising the enrollment rate and preventing school dropout in rural and mountainous areas.

In late 1970s the Chinese Communist Party and the state gradually shifted their focus to economic development and governments of all levels, in order to promote rural education, first restored the normal condition of rural education and then made various efforts to raise the enrollment rate in rural schools. For this purpose multi-grade instruction schools and teaching spots were established in remote and mountainous areas and community-employed teachers were employed for multi-grade instruction. Primary education did not become universal in Gansu until 1988. 23% of all Chinese children used to receive schooling in rural multi-grade schools of China, covering one third of the Chinese population. When the enrollment rate has been raised and consolidation rate has reached the target, the urgent thing is to raise the admission rate to higher schools. But a problem arose in the process: the acceptance rate

of multi-grade schools and teaching spots has been in a stalemate, due to the following reasons:

Educational resources are lacking in mountainous areas.

The quality of teachers is low.

Teaching methods are out-dated and need to be improved.

2. Multi-grade instruction has laid a good foundation for promoting the nine-year compulsory education and raising teaching quality in rural and mountainous areas.

From 1985 to 2002, the nine-year compulsory education became universal in China. In some very backward mountainous areas this goal has been achieved in the early years of this century with the support of the national plan for the nine-year compulsory education.

Through a series of national seminars and training sessions multi-grade instruction has been improved and therefore played an important role in making the nine-year compulsory education universal. A great amount of research data have indicted that, due to the advanced concepts embodied in multi-grade instruction, i.e. individualized education, tiered teaching and “teaching students according to their aptitude”, the non-intelligent factors of many local students are better than those of single-grade instruction.

3. The new achievements and new methods from multi-grade instruction have provided new ways of reaching teaching goals for the disadvantaged.

Since 2003, under the background of scientific development and construction of a new socialist countryside, there have been adjustments and changes in educational policies for rural areas. Many places across the country, in view of their own economic development and requirements for quality education, have either canceled, merged, suspended or built some rural schools, so as to make the shift from scattered low efficiency to concentrated high efficiency. In places with relative economic advancement, some boarding schools have been built around townships while some scattered multi-grade schools and teaching spots have been canceled or merged into others, with the result that children from remote areas could enjoy the same kind of high-quality education as those living in urban areas. But, because China is a large country with a big population, economic development has not been balanced, a great number of people are still live in sparsely populated remote and mountainous areas. So it is impossible to concentrate all the children into boarding schools. Some children still have to remain in schools with multi-grade instruction. As was reported by *Chinese Education*, in 2008 there are still more than 90,000 one-teacher multi-grade schools or teaching spots in western China. In the

mountainous areas of western China, about one third to one fifth of the children are still learning in such schools. In some mountainous counties students in multi-grade instruction schools account for about 15-25% of all and about 10% of the teachers are engaged in multi-grade instruction.

Under such circumstances, with the strong support of the National Multi-grade Instruction Committee and the sponsorship of the American Ford Foundation and Oxfam Hong Kong, Gansu UNESCO Association has been engaging in experiments on innovative multi-grade classroom teaching in rural areas, with hundreds of teachers from eight counties and districts of Gansu and Qinghai as participants. The experimental research and achievements in six consecutive years have been welcomed by the county or district educational departments and teachers in those rural areas. At present those methods have been spread to Gansu, Qinghai, Hebei and Anhui provinces. So we can say that the multi-grade instruction which was introduced from Germany and Japan in the late Qing Dynasty has taken its root, grown and developed in rural China for almost one hundred years and, in the current tide of economic development and social changes, it has not stagnated or lagging behind but has been invigorated with innovations.

4. In order to meet the requirements for the new teaching targets, a set of training methods have been created for single- and multi-grade

teachers to strengthen their interactive participation and to help them raise their teaching quality.

The training material used is *Innovative Model for Multigrade Classroom Instruction in Rural Primary Schools* and the training method is composed of three links: training schoolmasters—training trainers—training multi-grade instruction teachers. The schoolmaster of the central school in a district should first understand and master the new method for multi-grade instruction, then select from the central school some good teachers as future trainers. Finally those trainers will train multi-grade instruction teachers. The advantage of this method is that single-grade and multi-grade instruction will benefit and complement each other. Specifically speaking, in the training process, the trainees play the role of students and one of them is selected as the teacher, with the others listening and making assessment. After repeated drilling, the operational skills will be internalized and improved.

This kind of training focuses not only on training multi-grade instruction teachers but also single-grade instruction teachers' participation, so that the teaching concepts and skills of both multi-grade instruction and single-grade instruction will complement each other. After being trained in this way, single-grade instruction teachers introduce the "vertical interactive participative method" into single-grade instruction and designed the "layered-stimulation" teaching method, so as

to make multi-grade instruction more effective and to enhance the professional ability of single-grade instruction teachers.

5. Multi-grade instruction has contributed to the economic and cultural development and to the adult education in a remote village or community.

In a remote and mountainous area in China, a multi-grade school or teaching spot serves as the cultural and information center for a village or community. During the day the teacher gives lessons to the students while at night he or she teaches adults in order to raise their literacy rate and technical skills, communicate to them technological information and ways of becoming rich. Such arrangement has been welcomed by the people in the communities concerned.

## **II. New Orientations and New Problems in the Reform and Development of Multi-grade Instruction**

At present, educational departments of all levels have made plans to rearrange primary and middle schools, for the purpose of optimizing educational resources and turning the scattered low efficiency of education to concentrated high efficiency. So it is natural and necessary for some long-standing village schools and teaching spots to be cancelled or merged. Because agricultural structure has been readjusted, urbanization quickened and changes in rural population, age and gender have taken place, naturally the number of students in multi-grade schools

will be reduced. This is the beginning of a new period of development. Under this situation different opinions have arisen as regards many key issues of multi-grade instruction, such as its survival and development, what is advanced and what is backward in this teaching method, etc.

1. Some are of the opinion that multi-grade instruction is a backward phenomenon and a product of the special conditions in poverty-stricken mountainous areas, and it should be compulsorily eliminated now.

2. In the process of rearranging the school distribution, educational departments of all levels have emphasized the guideline of “advancing stably and seeking truth from facts”. But some people at the grassroots level, without in-depth investigation and neglecting the reality of remote and mountainous areas, have proposed the total elimination and merging of all the multi-grade teaching spots.

3. In rural areas, the concentrated rearrangement of school distribution has neglected multi-grade teaching spots and classes which have been struggling for survival, let alone research on present multi-grade instruction and teacher training. Many teachers engaged in multi-grade instruction only have a very vague idea about how to achieve the new teaching targets; those who have been working in this profession for quite a long time are now feeling that they do not have a clear and hopeful future and thus are considering changing their career. A feeling

of anxiety pervades among teachers for multi-grade instruction, which will certainly affect the normal teaching.

4. In some areas where the school distribution has already been rearranged, pupils above the second grade have been concentrated to boarding schools and the remaining first-grade pupils are now learning together with preschool classes. Textbooks for the first grade are used to teach the preschoolers. This will cause problems when they enter the first grade. Therefore, how to give multi-grade instruction to the first grade and the preschoolers is a new problem which has baffled the teachers and affected the quality of the initial education for children.

In view of the status quo and development of education in mountainous areas we are of the opinion that the structural readjustment cannot in a short period achieve its ideal goals, as is the case with urbanization in rural areas. There will be farmers, especially those in the mountainous areas, staying put in the countryside, to continue working on their ancestral land and their children, therefore, cannot be concentrated to boarding schools all at once. Some children will have to receive schooling in their own villages or townships.

Thus, we believe that, if multi-grade instruction is eliminated completely in the rural areas of western China, many pupils of the lower grades will not be able to go to boarding schools for learning. The problems that have appeared and will appear including the following:

(1) Some children from poor families in the remote and mountainous areas will not, due to various difficulties, go to boarding schools, and will drop out, thus resulting in new illiterates.

(2) When the first-grade pupils are put together with the preschoolers for multi-grade instruction, teachers who are not familiar with preschool education will have difficulty teaching those children to read and calculate. This will present an unnecessary learning burden to the children and may affect their healthy physical and mental development and also, might have an adverse effect on the intellectual development and learning performance when they enter the first grade.

(3) The cancellation or merging of a remote and mountainous village school will mean that the village has to lose its cultural and information center that has existed for many years and the villagers will not be able, as before, to get information about how to become rich and to communicate with the outside; they will also lose a venue for eliminating illiteracy and for technical education. If no compensatory measures are taken, it will cause a feeling of loss among those villagers who stick to their land.

(4) The cancellation of multi-grade schools and teaching spots will dampen the enthusiasm of all kinds of social sources which would like to make contributions for the educationally disadvantaged.

(5) This will affect research into and innovation of multi-grade instruction under the new circumstances.

### **III. Some Ideas on the Prospect of Reforming and Developing Multi-grade Instruction**

1. The historical contribution made by multi-grade instruction must be fully recognized.

2. There should be a scientific evaluation of the theoretical and applicable values of multi-grade instruction.

The above proposals are based the following aspects:

(1) From educational perspective, multi-grade instruction can fully embody the principle of “suited teaching to students’ levels”, because this kind of instruction is composed of different grades. In the teaching process attention is paid to different grades, different levels of intelligence, different needs and interests. This kind of individualized education will promote the overall development of pupils’ intellectual aspects.

(2) From pedagogical point of view, a multi-grade class, being smaller in size, facilitates the mutual help between older and younger pupils or between those of higher grades and lower grades, strengthens the interaction between teachers and pupils and also makes it easy for teachers to adopt more proper, more flexible and more individualized teaching methods in order to enhance the quality of teaching.

(3) From the perspective of the teaching targets, multi-grade instruction can help pupils develop their personality and cultivate their comprehensive qualities. This method is not only effective for the teaching of Chinese and mathematics, but also for teaching music, physical education and fine arts, subjects which can be more embodied in classroom activities. The mutual participation of teachers and pupils into these activities can develop the latter's abilities.

(4) From the perspective of new educational rationale, the existence and development of multi-grade instruction under specific conditions embodies, to certain extent, the idea of educational equality.

Therefore, in the new situation of reform and development, multi-grade instruction should be innovative both in educational ideas and theoretical development and also centered around the requirements of educational development.

3. Current requirements for the sustainable development of multi-grade instruction.

(1) In remote and mountainous areas some villages are quite scattered and the distance between each other is often very far. So it is not convenient for grade-one pupils to go to boarding schools. Also, because the number of pupils in the boarding schools is too small, multi-grade is still needed.

(2) During the process of canceling and merging teaching spots, the first grade pupils are too young to be concentrated into boarding schools. So it was decided by the relevant townships that multi-grade instruction be conducted to the first grade and preschoolers.

(3) In the boarding schools multi-grade instruction is extensively used for subjects such as music, physical education and fine arts. So we should research into the methods and skills of multi-grade instruction for those subjects and train teachers' in these respects, in order to deal with the problems of teaching without clear-cut goals.

4. We need to continue study multi-grade instruction, broaden its range of application, reform its methods and enhance the teaching quality. The use of multi-grade instruction rationale and methods in single-grade classes can also help raise the teaching and learning efficiency and facilitate pupils' overall development.

First, interactive interface is to be enlarged and interaction intensified, so that the classroom teaching will be as open as possible.

Second, the multi-grade instruction platform should be used to broaden and deepen the research areas concerning the school-based courses.