

All together now

All over the world, children of different ages and grades are educated together. Far from being backward, these systems may have much to teach us, says **Angela Little**

In northern Darfur, north-west Sudan, the chief of the Tomorro pastoral community successfully lobbied the government to create a mobile multigrade school.

Parents agreed to contribute to the salary of Ibrahim, the teacher, a man from the same tribe as the villagers. Together the chief and teacher encouraged parents to send their children – boys and girls – to a four-grade primary school. In 2003 the school consisted of four thorn bush huts in different parts of a dry dusty field, one for each grade.

There are 188 students, of whom only 36 are girls, ranging in age from 6 to 16. The biggest class is grade 1, with 90 children. Squeezed together in rows on the sand, they occupy most of the ground space. Numbers diminish as the grades increase: grade 2 has 45 children; grade 3, 28; and

grade 4, 23. The number of girls also decreases – in the top two grades, there are four times as many boys as girls.

Ibrahim teaches grades 1 and 2 in the morning, striding back and forth across the hot scrub between the classrooms, setting work and leading recitation. In the afternoon he does the same with grades 3 and 4, each in their respective classrooms.

Thousands of miles away, in Sri Lanka, Maheswari, a school principal, unlocks the door to the single-room school in the tea estate. The other teacher in the school, Siva, lives 25 miles away and arrives by bus, long after school has started. There are 120 children enrolled in five grades, and on any school day about two-thirds attend. Each grade has its own space and blackboard. Maheswari moves from grade to grade, giving instructions, opening textbooks and writing exercises on the blackboard for the upper grades.



The extent of multigrade education

- In Burkina Faso, west Africa, in 2000, 36 per cent of schools and 20 per cent of classes were multigrade; 18 per cent of school children were studying in multigrade classes.
- In England in 2000, 25.4 per cent of all classes in primary education were classified as “mixed year”: two or more curriculum grades were being taught by one teacher. A quarter of all learners were studying in mixed-year classes.
- In New Brunswick, Canada, in 2003–04, 13.9 per cent of all classes in elementary schools (kindergarten to grade 8) combined grades.
- In France in 2000, 34 per cent of public schools had “combined” classes, and 4.5 per cent were single-teacher schools.
- In India in 1996, 84 per cent of primary schools had at most three teachers.
- In the Republic of Ireland in 2001–02, 42 per cent of all primary school classes comprised two or more grades.
- In Norway, in 2000, 35 per cent of all primary schools were small schools using multigrade teaching.
- In Peru in 1998, 78 per cent of all public primary schools were multigrade, and 41 per cent of multigrade schools had only one teacher.



Meanwhile the children in grades 1 to 3 wait quietly, patiently, books piled high on desks, unopened.

Maheswari, Siva and Ibrahim are just three of the world’s multigrade teachers who struggle to provide a basic quality education for millions of young learners. Curriculum developers generally create teaching and learning materials on the assumption that a teacher is responsible for one, not several, grades at once. Teacher educators rarely address the challenges of teaching in a multigrade setting with their trainees.

Our new book, *Education for All and Multigrade Teaching* (Springer 2006), addresses these challenges as well as the opportunities multigrade settings offer for quality learning.

In many countries multigrade classes arise out of necessity and are regarded as second-class education. Yet in some

parts of the world learning and teaching in multigrade classes is embraced as the pedagogy of choice.

Based on original research conducted over the past six years in ten countries throughout the world, our book aims to raise awareness of the extent and realities of multigrade classes and to explore the implications for educators and policymakers, especially those committed to the goals of Education for All.

Much of the research has been undertaken by IOE PhD students and their supervisors. For example, one researcher offers an explanation of why low-attaining pupils (especially boys) in the Turks and Caicos islands showed better progress in reading in multigrade schools than in monograde settings.

Another author uncovers how teachers in the Peruvian Amazon have developed a range of strategies for coping with the multigrade classroom, despite lack of training, resources and support – and how the strategies used by children in their out-of-school learning can be usefully brought into the classroom. A third chapter explores the perceptions of teachers of the challenges and opportunities presented by multigrade classes in densely populated London, a

setting not usually thought of by most as needing or having multigrade classes.

A Ghanaian colleague explores an NGO education initiative for out-of-school children in poor and remote settlements in northern Ghana which operates on the principles of multigrade teaching. He suggests that these principles hold much promise for children who are not attending school.

The introductory and concluding chapters set out the multigrade challenge in the context of Education for All, synthesise what we know about the processes and outcomes of learning and teaching in multigrade settings and conclude with a set of questions for proponents of Education for All.

Multigrade settings are viewed by many as second best or old-fashioned. But with their emphasis on the learner, on learning how to learn and on the development of social as well as cognitive skills, others view multigrade education as progressive and good quality.

For millions of learners worldwide it is not a matter of choice between multigrade and monograde. For them the choice is between a multigrade class or no class at all. These settings call for multigrade pedagogies that work. ■



Angela Little is professor of education and international development in the School of Lifelong Education and International Development. *Education for All and Multigrade Teaching: Challenges and opportunities*, edited by Angela W Little (Springer, 2006), is available from the IOE bookshop, retailers worldwide and springer.com a.little@ioe.ac.uk www.ioe.ac.uk/multigrade