

Adapted/Adjusted Curriculum for Multigraded teaching in Africa: A real solution?

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*“If you want 1 year of prosperity, grow crops.
If you want 10 years of prosperity, grow trees.
If you want 100 years of prosperity, grow people.”*

Chinese Proverb

INTRODUCTION

Today, more than 30 per cent of classrooms worldwide are multi-grade. But despite their growing numbers, government administrators often ignore these schools and they are rarely reported in statistics and educational research. [Joubert, 2006, p. 10]

The choice in favour of multigrade schools is often a choice between education and no education.

Ironically, while multigrade classes could be a solution for educating rural people in many African countries, governments tend to focus on improving conventional schools, often leaving the development of multi-grade schools to local initiative. For this reason, multi-grade schools in rural Africa tend to show poor results, which in turn give them a negative image. [Juvane , 2007 : 2]

Multi-grade teaching is not a new idea, but it now calls for a much broader operational and technical definition to address problems and issues facing most educational systems. In Africa, as a consequence of shortages of teachers, teacher

absenteeism owing to HIV/AIDS related causes and to budget restraints facing many countries, multi-grade classes are an inevitable option. Ministries of Education see multi-grade teaching approaches as a key pedagogic tool that can assist teachers to cope with teaching in these very difficult situations.[Juvane, 2006 : 4]

Multi-grade teaching has become one of the priority topics on the agenda of the Working Group on the Teaching Profession (WGTP) . The reason for bringing this issue on board is the recognition that multi-grade teaching has the potential to the improve quality of teaching, thus contributing to the global effort of achieving EFA goals and education- related MDGs.[Juvane , 2007 : 24]

A technical workshop attended by practitioners from six African countries was organised in Uganda, in November 2004 to test new modules on multi-grade teaching. In July 2005, Tanzania hosted the first training workshop for that purpose attended by eleven countries represented by policy makers, curriculum developers, educators, inspectors and teachers. This was follow-up by a workshop in Lesotho from 26 February – 2 March 2007.

The following countries were present at the workshop: Botswana, Cameroon, Lesotho, Mauritius, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Zambia and Gambia. The major discussions during the workshop were on the issues of the training of teachers for MG schools and the adjustment of the national curricula for MG teaching . [Juvane , 2007: 10)

UNESCO and Rural Education in Africa

Education is a basic right in itself and an essential prerequisite for reducing poverty and improving the living conditions of rural people, as well as for building a food-secure world. Poverty continues to put large numbers of learners at risk of school failure. Illiteracy often coincides with poverty and hunger, with problems of child and maternal health and with greater exposure to HIV/AIDS. Nelson Mandela has reminded business representatives on numerous occasions, “You can smell poverty when you visit many parts of rural South Africa”.

A recent study points to a singular conclusion: that the great majority of children in rural poor communities are receiving less than is their right in a democratic South Africa. Worse still is the fact that this will have long-term effects on their opportunities for development, their capabilities and their lives. [Emerging Voices, 2005 :25]

This indifference towards rural people is the result of a strong urban bias on the part of politicians and policy-makers. “Rural people have no real political voice, so when there is competition for limited resources – and education for remote areas can be costly – they tend to lose out”, says Lavinia Gasperini, Senior Officer at the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). [WGTP , 2005].

“Education for rural people lies at the heart of rural development and this is fundamental for reducing poverty worldwide,” comments David Atchoarena, Senior

Programme Specialist at the UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP). [Atchoarena and Gasperini, 2003 :234]

Therefore FAO and UNESCO launched the global **Education for Rural People (ERP)** flagship partnership during the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in 2002 in Johannesburg. FAO is the ERP lead agency and the partnership coordination unit is hosted by the FAO Sustainable Development Department.

[Joubert, 2006:10]

Ensuring that **Education for All (EFA)** also includes *all rural people* is an urgent task for the South African community at large. There is, however, a low level of awareness among decision makers of the impact of rural people illiteracy on development.[Juvane , 2007 : 8]

The Dakar Framework for Action outlines a number of goals in order to meet the EFA challenges, each with special relevance to Education for Rural People. The Framework calls for ensuring that, by 2015, all children, with a special emphasis on girls and children in difficult circumstances, have access to free and compulsory primary education of good quality. [Daniel , 2004 :7]

This goal compels governments to educate ALL children, including those most difficult to reach , such as children living in remote and rural areas. Therefore, there is a need to seek them out and find ways keeping them in school or in alternative but equivalent programmes. [FAO and UNESCO, 2003]

African countries are committed to achieve full access and completion of quality universal primary education within the framework of MDGs and EFA goals.[Juvane , 2007 : 6]

Multi-grade teaching

Multi-grade teaching, which has been practiced in both developed and developing countries has shown success with adequate support and is one of the major alternatives.

In that regard the potential of multi-grade teaching is :

- * A pedagogic approach to increase access and retention, while improving quality education;
- * A strategy to address teacher shortages, particularly in small and remote schools.

[Juvane , 2007 : 8]

The availability of education is relatively difficult in rural areas where population density is low and where schooling does not easily fit with the patterns of rural livelihoods and lifestyles. [Daniel , 2004 : 6]

These circumstances may encourage the adoption of different ways of providing schooling. One strategy, promoted in the 1960s and currently enjoying something of a renaissance in Africa , is to use multigrade schools.

The term “multi-grade teaching “ is not universal, but the practice is widespread.

Multi-grade teaching refers to settings where the teacher is responsible for teaching

children of different grade levels at the same time. Multi-grade teaching is not a new idea, but it now calls for a much broader operational and technical definition to address problems and issues facing most educational systems , [Birch, I. & Lally, M., 1995 :67) especially in Africa .

Many terms are found in the literature to describe multigrade settings. The terms ‘combination classes’, ‘forced mixed - age classes’ and ‘forced mixed grade’ usually refer to settings arising through necessity and the characteristics of enrolment. The terms ‘vertical grouping’, ‘ungraded,’ ‘non graded’ and ‘family grouping’ usually refer to settings arising through pedagogic choice. .[Joubert, 2004 :8)

Many countries in Latin America and Asia are achieving success with the multigrade approach, which is increasing enrolment, improving performance and reducing absenteeism in rural areas. [Miller, 1991:11] One example is the Escuela Nueva programme in Colombia, which increased enrolment in rural areas by 45 per cent between 1988 and 1996. [Rowley, 1992 :221] By its nature, multi-grade teaching encompasses teacher development, curriculum reform, language issues, learning, support materials and tutor pedagogic awareness. It is clear that a strong need exists for training in how to work effectively in multigrade schools to improve learning. [Thomas, 1992 : 25]

Research has shown that the performance levels most of learners in rural schools in literacy and numeracy and in mathematics - the foundation on which all other forms of learning depend - are at least 2 years behind their counterparts in other schools. [Atchoarena and Gasperini, 2003: 130)

Home background disadvantages, such as the lack of parental interest in education, poverty, poor nutrition and the differences between home and school culture form part of the problem.[Mouton , 2003 : 45] and even enrolment drops off rapidly when children, especially young children and girls, have to walk more than two kilometres to school[Verspoor , 2004 : 6

Adjusting /adapting National curricula?

A crucial issue is that the curriculum must be relevant to rural people's needs.

[Hargreaves, 2001 :500] The type of adjustment / adaptation of the curriculum should recognise that:

- * Pupils may be developing at different rates
- * More flexible approaches to pupil retention and promotion are needed
- * There should be a focus on learning outcomes rather than content achievement
- * *Learner focussed* rather than *teacher directed* methods (including peer instruction, cooperative group-work and independent self-study)
- * Teachers should be trained to be facilitators rather than *keepers of knowledge*. [Juvane,2007)

It is especially important that the content of education is closely related to local conditions to enable learners to apply the knowledge and skills learned. [Joubert, 2004 :10] Linking school with the community will enable teachers to improve the quality and relevance of the education they are providing. [Little,1995: 240] This is not happening in most of the Multi-grade schools in Africa . The relevance of the

curricula used in primary schooling and other basic education programmes in rural areas determines their appeal to learners and their effectiveness at meeting basic learning needs. [Taylor, 1997:23

The key word in any discussion of an ideal model is flexibility. The curriculum has to be very flexible, given the nature of Multigrade teaching.[Rowley, ,1992 :135] One of the greatest difficulties in promoting Multigrade teaching is the inflexibility of grade-based curricula. In most small Multigrade classes or schools, the teachers are required to cover all the material for any one year for all the students enrolled for that year. [Miller, 1991 :12

A second and related concept is that of integration. Integration in Multigrade Teaching will most often involve an integration of pupils from different grade levels and competencies. It also involves integration of the curriculum, either with subjects such as science and mathematics, or subjects in the social sciences . [Thomas, 1992 :36]

Teachers in this context face a considerable hurdle in managing such integration , given the need to know much more of the content of primary education across two or more grades and in every subject area. Although some subject areas are more easily integrated than others, the problem remains a large one since some subjects are not best taught in a whole class situation.[Little, 2001]

An overriding factor is the need to match the amount of time spent in teaching different grades in the Multigrade Teaching content with the national learning

outcomes/ content which determine how much time will be spent on any one subject in any one year.[Gasperini, 2000 :23]

National governments in Africa require all teaching to follow the national curricula but the application of a single grade teaching national curriculum in the Multi-grade teaching situation creates problems for Multi-grade teaching teachers. [Daniel , 2004] Such syllabi :

- are not structured for Multi-grade Teaching classes,
- places a heavier work-load on Multi-grade Teaching teachers compared with their single - grade teaching counterparts,
- impede the capacity of the Multi-grade Teaching teachers, given the lack of facilities and problems of management at the local level, and
- Do not allow for the time constraints placed on Multi-grade Teaching teachers , given the preparation time required and the need to address a wider range of students' needs.

In Africa the curricula prescribed are the same for both urban and rural areas.[Joubert, 2004 :7] . Most often, the designed curriculum lacks relevance and is dysfunctional when applied to the socio-economic needs and cultural lifestyles of Multigrade teaching learners and their communities. [Juvane, 2005:24].

Moreover, the conceptual and skill requirements of the prescribed curriculum are too great for the teacher to cope with, given the pressing problems and concerns which have to be addressed in the Multigrade teaching situation. [Berry, 2001: 569]

This is a challenge, of quality and relevance, and has tended to attract less attention. Governments, educational organisations and donors alike have prioritised expansion - an emphasis reflected in the calls for universal primary education since the early 1960`s (Little , 1995:23)

For these reasons there is a need to re-organize and improve the curriculum for Multigrade teaching by way of : Improving the curriculum content by developing subject matter in a way which makes it relevant to the social conditions of the communities and the needs of the children [Ames, 2004:246]

Experience suggests at least four guidelines for re-designing basic education content for learners in rural areas :

- * First, the curriculum should relate to the local context, customs, livelihoods and rural development activities. [WGTP, 2005]
- * Second, it should take due account of the teachers' qualifications and training (although ideally these should be in accord with the curriculum).(Ames, 2004 : 220)
- * Third, it should make use of locally available skills, knowledge and other resources. [WGTP, 2005]
- * Fourth, it should respond to the expressed wishes of the community (i.e. be demand-driven), determined through consultation and negotiation with the community, or the adult learners. [Juvane , 2005:20]

Whatever configuration of content may be, basic education should equip learners to continue learning, apply critical thinking and cope with the changes they will encounter in life. [Forgotten Schools , 2004:12]

The Escuela Nueva (New School) programme developed in Columbia over the past 30 years demonstrates that it is definitely possible to achieve a functional balance in the basic education curriculum that respects national criteria and responds to local rural conditions. [Psacharopoulos, Rojas and Velez,1993 :278]

All African governments are committed not only to providing education for all EFA , but also to ensuring that what is provided is of the best quality that the country can afford. Investment in the skills of multi-grade teaching should therefore be seen as contributing to the goal of quality for all.

The challenge is to find specific modalities to address this curriculum issue. That's why ALL the Education departments must come to the party and let people with knowledge on this topic help them so that these schools/children are not forgotten and that they can really be part of the future of Africa and not be marginalised .

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