

## 'Bringing the School to the Child': Multigrade schools in Vietnam'

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*'Basic education must be provided equitably so that all children ... can attain a necessary level of learning achievement. An active commitment must be made to disadvantaged populations, for whom basic education is a means of reducing social, cultural and economic disparities.'*

*Article VIII World Charter on Education for All.*

In February 1999 Sheila Aikman and I were invited by the British Council to visit Northern Vietnam to undertake a three-week research project with the Research Centre for Ethnic Minority Education at the Ministry of Education and Training. We were to develop case studies of multigrade schools, in which teachers teach two or more grades in the same class. The government of Vietnam promotes multigrade schools for children living in remote rural areas where the population is dispersed and disadvantaged. By 'bringing the school to the child' the Government seeks to reduce the educational gap between children in urban and rural areas and achieve Universal Primary Education (UPE) by the year 2000.

A programme of visits was organised by Mrs. Thanh, from the Ministry of Education and Training, who joined the research team and acted as interpreter. This was one of the first tours of its kind. The programme included relatively well-provided-for demonstration schools supported by a UNICEF-funded project in the wet rice areas of the Thai, Muong peoples. It also took us to small satellite-schools in the high mountain regions of the Hmong and Dao peoples. These schools were several days walk from the centre-school. We felt privileged to be the first 'outsiders' to visit many of the schools. The hospitality received was warm and lavish, if occasionally challenging. (We were introduced to blood-soup and half-hatched eggs.) We were reminded, as we forded rivers and trekked for hours on foot into the mountains, that going to school is an exhausting experience for many children. We were also glad to return safely to Hanoi having narrowly escaped slipping off a wet mud road into the valley below and having witnessed the car accompanying us in collision with a local bus.

Current multigrade classroom practice: Multigrade teachers are trained to give different lessons at the same time to pupils at different grade-levels. Children sit in grade-groups facing their own blackboard and if there are two grade-groups in the class the blackboards are placed at either end of the classroom with children facing opposite directions. During lessons the teacher moves frequently between the different groups. This can be illustrated by a record of observations made during the three-hour school day at Pa Noc School in Son La Province where Dao children were being taught by a Kinh teacher. In the first lesson the teacher set grade 2 children to read aloud from their text book and gave dictation to grade 3. In the second lesson the teacher instructed grade 2's monitor to copy the previous day's maths homework onto their blackboard and told grade 3 to

copy the handwriting exercises from their blackboard onto their slates. Leaving the group monitor in charge she then went to set grade 2 a maths task. She then returned to check grade 3's work before going back to check grade 2's maths task.

Class sizes were small, usually not more than 20 children. In one school we observed a teacher giving different lessons at the same time to five different grade levels. There were 13 children (3 girls and 10 boys) in this class and only one child in grade 1 who sat alone facing his blackboard. The extra work involved in multigrade teaching is recognised by giving teachers 50% additional salary for two grades and 75% for three or more grades. In some schools there were enough grade 1 children for them to be taught in a monograde class. These classes, which paid special attention to developing the children's literacy, were taught by a teacher from the same ethnic group as the children themselves.

Constraints to the quality of teaching in multigrade schools: Amongst the constraints identified were teacher isolation and the poverty and poor health of children. In remote communities the quality of teaching suffered because teachers were isolated from the mainstream of education. Teachers in satellite-schools lacked the support to make creative use of the resources at hand. They rarely received support visits and could not meet regularly with teachers from other schools.

Most multigrade teachers belong to the majority ethnic group known as Vietnamese or Kinh and suffer consequent social, cultural and linguistic isolation. Kinh teachers are sent to these remote areas because there is a severe shortage of teachers from the local minority ethnic groups. The scenario described below typifies the many dilemmas they face.

Teacher's dilemmas A Hmong multigrade satellite school with a Kinh (ethnic Vietnamese) teacher in Lai Chau Province. The children and community speak no Vietnamese. The teacher has:

- no Hmong language
- no local knowledge
- no communication with students
- no materials, no teaching aids, no literate environment
- multigrade training but cannot apply it
- no visits from educational support staff to date (e.g. by the headmaster of centre school): the teacher wants to leave as soon as possible.

The quality of learning also suffers because many communities are too poor to make the best use of the education provided. Poor attendance and high drop-out rates, especially for girls, reflect the need for families to use child labour on their farms. In many areas high levels of iron and iodine deficiency impairs the ability to learn and lowers achievement in school.

Strategies for enhancing the quality of multigrade teaching in remote areas: Our strategies focused on ending the isolation of teachers and 'bringing multigrade schools in from the cold'. One strategy was to organise more practical in-service training at centre-school level and to help teachers recognise the potential teaching resources existing around them. Remote schools would be provided with resource boxes for making teaching aids and a small library with picture books, comics, newspapers and children's games. This library would circulate between satellite schools. On-going teacher development would encourage teachers to become active learners, problem solvers, experimenters and innovators. In-service training would also help teachers both to exploit the so-called '15% window' in the curriculum for teaching local history, culture and traditions and to involve parents.

Another strategy was to train multigrade teachers in health promotion, agriculture and microfinance. This would help to break the vicious cycle of low educational achievement, poor health and poverty and meet the perceived needs of the parents and children. The short three-hour school day leaves time for teachers to engage in these wider development activities.

We look forward to returning to Vietnam next year with Angela Little for a multigrade workshop. This workshop will bring together colleagues involved in the EID multigrade research project from Vietnam, Sri Lanka and Peru to share experiences of classroom practice and to further explore ways of enhancing its effectiveness.

**Further reading:**

Little A. (1995) Multi-grade teaching a review of research and practice. London: ODA (DFID).

Theis J. (1999) Ethnic Minority Education Problem Analysis and Programme Strategy. Hanoi:SCF/UK.

UNICEF/MOET (1998) Multigrade and Bilingual Education classes in Primary School in Vietnam. Hanoi: UNICEF/MOET.