

# MULTIGRADE TEACHING IN BELIZE

*Wilma Wright, Belize Teacher Training College*

## **Introduction**

Belize, a small country in Central America, has a population of 238,000 and a population density of 26, 9 per square mile (Central Statistical Office, 1998). Belize has a unique education system where there is a partnership between the government and the various religious bodies. "Under this partnership the Government establishes education objectives, provides funds to pay teachers' salaries, contributes half the costs of facilities and their maintenance, develops curricula and administrative standards, trains teachers and administers examinations. The church organizations are responsible for the management and the maintenance of their schools and personnel matters" (Belize Education Statistical, Digest: 1998-99, p.5).

This sparse population and church-state partnership are two of the main reasons for multigrade teaching in Belize. A 1993 research on multigrade teaching revealed that of the 241 primary schools, 85 of them were fully multigrade schools. That is each teacher in the school had to teach one or more grade level. Many of the multigrade schools are in very remote areas where there is a scarcity of teaching resources. Because of this remoteness, multigrade schools have not been able to attract trained teachers and as a result many of the teachers in these schools are untrained. (The 1993 multigrade teaching research showed that less than 1/3 of the teachers in multigrade schools were fully trained).

This paper will describe the tradition of multigrade teaching in Belize, examine the multigrade teaching modules that were developed for Caribbean countries and discuss the future of multigrade teacher training in Belize.

## **The tradition of Multigrade Schools in Belize**

Belize formal education system requires that children receive eight years of primary education. Primary education is thus divided into three divisions: Infant 1. Infant 2 and Standard 1 are considered lower division, Standards 2 and 3 are the middle division and Standard 4, 5 and 6 are the upper the division. The Catholic denomination, however, has an additional year because all children entering their schools begin at beginners (kindergarten) instead of Infant 1. In some schools, mainly the Catholic schools, Standard 1 is considered a part of the middle division. While there is a standard format for the division of classes there is no standard set for the combination of classes in multigrade schools. The '93 study revealed that most multigrade schools combined classes by divisions. This combination is dependent on the number of teachers available and their experience and academic qualifications.

At the time of the '93 study on multigrade teaching, very little or no attention was given to the multigrade situation in Belize. Teachers had to rely on their own initiative,

creatively and experience in multigrade teaching through trial and error or seek advice from older colleagues who have had similar experiences. The multigrade teaching study found that many teachers used common subject teaching for Mathematics and Language Arts and subject grouping for secondary subjects like Science and Social Studies. This study also found out that the most common approach to common subject was the teacher working with one class while the other classes were given seatwork. Many teachers preferred to use materials that they made as resources for their multigrade teaching. Approximately, 54% of teachers in multigrade schools made use of peer tutoring to assist them in their teaching.

### **The need for and development of multigrade training materials**

The 1993 multigrade teaching study conducted by a consultant from the Institute of International Research and two lecturers at the Belize Teachers' College was the College's first attempt to address the concerns of teachers in multigrade situations. It was also the first documented multigrade teaching research done in Belize. This study suggested that teachers in multigrade teaching assignments were seriously deficient both in content and teaching strategies and also in the approaches to multigrade teaching. Many teachers were relying on trial and error and/or their colleagues for assistance in multigrade teaching. In very remote areas teachers also had less access to teaching materials and resources.

Since this study, Belize Teachers' College has taken several steps in providing training in multigrade teaching.

1. Training was provided to the Belize Teachers) College faculty members in multigrade teaching.
2. Some faculty members participated in writing the content of multigrade teaching materials for the Caribbean countries under the directorship of the Commonwealth Secretariat.
3. Supervisors used the first drafts of these materials to conduct workshops to principals and teachers in multigrade schools.
4. These materials were also used as part of the training for principals in a certificate programme for educational administration at the primary school level.
5. In December '98 Belize Teachers ' College again participated in converting the content of the multigrade training modules into distance learning materials. This exercise, that lasted a week, was conducted in Belize with other writers from Jamaica, Guyana and Trinidad. This activity became a reality through the collaborative efforts of the Commonwealth Secretariat, the Commonwealth of Learning and the Caribbean Community Secretariat.

6. A year before it was decided to convert the multigrade modules to distance learning materials the Belize Teachers' College had made the decision to expand its *Classroom Organization and Management Course* from 45 hours to 60 hours in order to include a unit on multigrade teaching, and to offer *Classroom Organization and Management* through a distance learning mode rather than the face-to-face mode. Multigrade Teaching is now offered to all teachers during the first Level of their training. Two cohorts of student teachers will complete the *Classroom Organisation and Management* course this June and will be taking their final examination July 2000.

Since the implementation of the multigrade unit, 205 student teachers have received training and another 80 will begin training in multigrade teaching this summer and complete the practical component from September to December. This will bring us to a total of 285 teachers who would have received training in multigrade- teaching techniques and strategies out of the 2000 teachers in the country of Belize.

### **The implementation process to make modules an Integral part of the teacher training programme**

The College felt that many of the strategies and methodologies used for multigrade situations were also applicable in monograde classrooms where there exist individual differences among students. Many times teachers who were offered posts in multigrade schools after training were unwilling to take up such assignments because of their feeling of inadequate training in this area. For these reasons the College took the decision to make training in multigrade teaching an integral part of the Classroom Organization and Management course, a course that is being offered to teachers in the Level I distance education programme.

As stated earlier the multigrade modules produced through the Commonwealth Secretariat (COMSEC) initiative were incorporated into the Classroom Organization and Management Course for which some modules were already developed. As a result not all the COMSEC modules from the multigrade series were used, and adaptations were made to some of those that were being used.

*Module 5: Timetabling and Scheduling* was used in its entirety.

Some modifications were made to *Module 7: Instructional Resources and Resource Management*. Unit 2 that dealt with Electronic Based Instructional Resources was not used because it was felt that this section did not provide teachers with enough information and strategies on how to use these resources as a teaching tool. Instead it just briefly stated the advantages and disadvantages of these resources and gave a brief description of each resource. Beginning teachers need more information and examples on the use of these resources as a teaching tool. Because of time we were unable to make the necessary adjustments to this section but the course tutor intends to work at making the kinds of modifications that will benefit the Level 1 teachers. A few examples were also added in some areas of this module to emphasize certain points that Belizean teachers are having difficulties implementing. For example, information on

the use of the chalkboard as a teaching tool was modified. Over the years teachers in Belize have not been making maximum use of the chalkboard. This section was well developed but it was felt that a few examples would assist teachers to better understand what was written.

For *Module 4: Teaching Strategies for Multigrade*, only Unit 5 that dealt with grouping was being used. This section was made into a booklet and some graphics added to the cover for attraction. Many of the strategies covered in this module were already covered in the *Teaching Methods* course that is also a part of the Level I distance education course.

While the other modules have not been used in the Classroom Organization and Management course supervisors have made use of the materials when providing advice to teachers in multigrade situations and for conducting workshops for principals and teachers upon request. These modules will also be useful to the College as it develops in-service training for teachers in the future.

### **Results of the Implementation of the Modules**

While no formal evaluation has been done on the implementation of the modules as yet, student teachers have verbally expressed that the modules have given them some insights on how to deal with several classes or with children with varying abilities and skills. Student teachers in monograde classrooms, a large percent of teachers who are currently in the distance education programme, felt that the modules on multigrade teaching were also applicable to monograde situations and that they were able to apply many of the approaches to their classroom situations.

Many of the assignments were practical and centered around the module on *Timetabling and Scheduling* and the unit on Grouping. These assignments required a lot of practice in order for teachers to develop the necessary skills for efficient implementation. Several supervisors had to conduct extra study sessions to help student teachers connect their readings in the modules to classroom practice. A suggestion from many supervisors is for the course to run over two semesters instead of one and for several checklists to be developed for the various skills that teachers are expected to implement. For example, there can be a checklist on the teachers' ability to manage the class and another checklist on the teachers' ability to deal with individual differences and appropriate scheduling of time. Supervisors felt that several checklists will help them to monitor teachers' learning and teaching more effectively and efficiently.

The '93 multigrade study showed that only 30% of the teachers surveyed were using learning centers as a resource in their teaching. In the Classroom Organization and Management course student teachers were expected to develop a learning center that would enhance the teaching learning process in their classrooms. It was hoped that this assignment would help teachers to rely on a very helpful resource when working with one group/class while the other groups are being left on their own. As cited elsewhere,

many teachers in the 1993 multigrade study preferred using their own teaching aid or resorted to peer teaching in such instances.

The results of the learning centers as a teaching resource were very positive. Many teachers found them very useful when they implemented the common subject teaching in their classrooms. It was rewarding to observe children being actively involved in learning through the use of the learning centers. Both the teachers and the students seemed to have enjoyed and benefited from the experience.

Subject staggering, an approach to multigrade teaching where each grade does a different subject at a specified time, gave teachers the most problem to implement. For many of them they did not concentrate on their children's needs and just taught the same material twice to different sets of children. This approach to multigrade teaching created a double burden for the teachers rather than alleviating some of the stresses of multigrade teaching and catering to the individual needs of children.

Many teachers were excited about the integrated day approach. This was an approach that was also being stressed in the Teaching Methods course. Teachers who tried out this approach felt that it made learning more meaningful to the children. This approach was also synchronized with the new curriculum and, consequently, offered teachers some skills in planning from the new curriculum.

### **Advantages and disadvantages**

The multigrade training materials for Caribbean teachers were a welcomed resource to Belize where teachers have complained constantly about their frustrations with multigrade teaching. It also offered much needed information that can also be used monograde classrooms. The greatest strength of these modules is that they expose teachers to those factors that must be considered in both multigrade and monograde teaching. They help the teacher to realise the importance of catering to individual differences and expose them to strategies that can be used to meet the varying needs of children.

Although multigrade teaching is the focus of the modules, references were made on how materials can also be used in monograde situations. Therefore, the materials are beneficial to teachers in any situation whether multigrade or monograde.

Most of the scenarios and examples were relevant to Belizean classroom experiences and built on experiences that teachers who are already in multigrade situations may encounter. They are also very interactive and allow the teachers to reflect on their own practice. This type of learning reflects the constructivist view of teaching where learning is seen as "an internal process in which learners actively construct knowledge by connecting new information to what they already know." (Falk, 1994: 1).

The print and layout of the modules made reading easy. In many cases a beginning teacher with a low academic background could progress through the modules quite easily.

### **Areas for Improvement**

While the modules are welcomed as necessary resources, there are some areas that can be improved. Although a lot of issues and topics were discussed, because of space many of these topics were not addressed in-depth. Because Belize lacked resources in many of the areas where the modules were used, there is a need to provide more examples and explanations to key concepts in multigrade teaching. In the case of Belize, supervisors had to conduct face-to-face sessions to explain some of the key concepts of topics like timetabling and scheduling and grouping.

Very few linkages and references were made to other modules in the series. For example, grouping students is very important and a necessary consideration in timetabling and scheduling yet no references were made to what was mentioned in the unit on grouping. For beginning teachers it is very difficult to make these connections.

The module on *Instructional Resources and Resource Management* described some very useful resources that must be considered in multigrade teaching. However, these resources were not discussed as teaching tools and very little was done on the actual management of these resources. For Belizean teachers who are already exposed on these types of resources, a discussion on how to use the machine is not as necessary as using them as teaching tools. Most or all of our teachers know how to use a tape recorder but they might not consider the ways in which these resources can be used as a teaching tool.

### **The Way Forward**

Nielsen et al in the '93 study on multigrade teaching cited that "It is now becoming clear that such schools will not pass away soon. In fact, it appears that they will continue be the norm in small, rural villages into the foreseeable future" (p. 1). The prediction of these researchers seven years ago remains a reality. A 1998 count of Belize's primary schools revealed that of the 284 schools 125 of them were considered fully or partly multigrade schools. It is imperative that a conscious effort is made to provide continuous training in multigrade teaching.

### **Continue to provide training to teachers in distance education programme**

The number of multigrade schools that still exist the constant transfer of teachers in the system and the demand for trained teachers in remote areas make it necessary for multigrade training to remain an integral part of teacher training. As Belize Teachers' College evolves into the University of Belize. Faculty of Education on August 1, 2000, training of teachers in multigrade teaching will also expand. The Faculty of Education will be responsible for the development and implementation of both degree and non-

degree courses in education. Surely there will be a need to provide in-service training in multigrade teaching to trained teachers who did not receive such training.

### **Collaboration between the training institution and the District Education Center**

The Ministry of education has now decided to decentralize the administration of education. This new form of administration will provide more autonomy and flexibility for districts to provide the necessary training that will benefit districts' educational needs. Districts with a high percentage of multigrade schools will now have the opportunity to provide the kinds of training needed to meet the district's specific needs in multigrade teaching. The Faculty of Education and the district centers can work together to provide multigrade training that takes into consideration the specific needs of each district

To improve the quality of multigrade teaching will also require that resources such as textbooks, tape recorders, radios and computers are made available for teachers to do necessary research and be able to create an environment that will enhance the quality of learning in multigrade schools.

### **The need for Research**

Further research on the situation of multigrade teaching in the various locals where multigrade schools exist must be considered and use to help in designing programmes that will benefit the learning that takes place in the classroom. The 1993 multigrade research recommended that "more in-depth assessments of teaching-learning processes need to be made before a clear idea of what works (and what should be included in training) can be fomulated" (p. 64). This kind of research will inform both the district centers administrators and the faculty of education as they provide relevant multigrade teacher training. This might also require some modifications to the current teaching modules.

### **Conclusion**

The need for training in multigrade teaching is essential for effective teaming in both multigrade and mono grade classrooms in Belize. The current modules on multigrade teaching have been the springboard for effective classroom practice and the alleviation of some of the fear of teaching in multigrade situations. However, future research must be conducted on the type of teaching that occurs in the classroom and a documented evaluation of the use of the current modules must also be conducted in order to build on what is presently in place.

## **References**

Commonwealth Secretariat (1997). Teacher education modules for multi-grade teaching modules 1-9 (DRAFT). Commonwealth Secretariat: London.

Falk, B. (1994) Teaching the way children learn. National Center for Restructuring Education, Schools, and Teaching: Teachers' College, Columbia University.

Nielsen, H.D., Gillett, E., Thompson, E. (1993). Multigrade teaching in Belize: Current practice and its relation to student achievement. Ministry of Education, Belize City.

Belize Educational Statistical Digest (1998-1999). Planning Unit, Ministry of Education, Belize City.

Belize Abstract of Statistics (1996). Central Statistics Office, Ministry of finance, Belmopan, Belize.

## **Resource person:**

Mrs Cynthia Thompson, Principal, Belize Teachers' College.