

Multigrade teaching: one response to Jomtien

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In this article, I describe how one response to the Jomtien Declaration was a research project about multigrade teaching. We have now completed more than a year of the project and we held the first of its three research team workshops here in UK, in September 1999. The workshop included paper presentations and seminars in London, a Conference Symposium at the Oxford Conference for Education and Development and field visits to multigrade primary schools in Wales.

Origins of an international research project on multigrade teaching

Multigrade teaching may be defined as the teaching by one teacher, of children working in several grades or age groups. In rural areas of the developing world, one teacher is put in charge of two or more grades' of children usually because of a scarcity of pupils, teachers and/or resources.

Ten years ago, participants of the World Conference on Education for All in Jomtien, Thailand, recognised, among other realities, that more than 100 million children had no access to primary education, that more than 100 million children failed to complete basic education programmes and that millions more satisfied the attendance requirements but did not acquire essential knowledge and skills during programmes.

One response to this situation, has been an increased interest in and emphasis on multigrade teaching, as a means to increasing universal access to education, to decreasing drop-out rates and to focussing on learning acquisition and learning outcomes rather than just enrolment. Our three year, DFID funded research project is one representation of the increased interest in and emphasis on multigrade teaching.

How multigrade teaching may contribute to education for all

The Declaration on Education for All (Article 3) states that basic education should be provided to all children and that underserved groups, such as rural and remote populations, should not suffer any discrimination in access to learning opportunities. The multigrade teaching research project aims to promote multigrade teaching, disseminate research findings, influence policy and depict multigrade teaching as a viable or indeed desirable alternative to monograde (or single year-group) teaching. If these messages are heard, children in rural and remote populations may experience improved access to a complete basic education. This might not be possible if policy or tradition dictated that one teacher were required per grade in order for any school to be established. In Vietnam, multigrade schools have been set up specifically with the aim of

increasing access in village areas, as described by Pat Pridmore's accompanying article and Son Vu's profile on Vietnam. The same is true in other countries, including the Philippines. For example, in one Filipino village, fifth and sixth grade children had to travel a few kilometres to monograde 5th and 6th grade classes in nearby villages, because their own village school only had classes for grades 1 to 4. Many therefore dropped out. By converting their own village school to a multigrade, complete grade 1-6 school with four teachers, the village children had a far greater incentive to complete their elementary education.

Yet, as Article 4 of the Declaration stresses, enrolment and continued attendance are not enough in themselves. Actual learning acquisition and outcomes are the focus of basic education. For this reason, our multigrade team is researching how teachers currently organise teaching and learning in multigrade primary schools and is conducting an intervention study in classrooms with teachers, on the organisation and management of the multigrade classroom. Through these research exercises, the appropriateness and effectiveness of multigrade teaching and learning may be assessed and recommendations made by multigrade teachers themselves and by the research team. Such recommendations are expected to benefit not only multigrade but also many monograde classrooms.

Article 7 of the World Declaration on Education for All stresses the importance of strengthening partnerships and Article 8 describes as essential the development of a supportive policy context, in order to realise the full provision and utilisation of basic education. In many systems of education, where monograde classes are the norm, the multigrade classroom and the needs of the multigrade teacher are often unrecognised in national and international policy, in teacher education curricula, in curriculum or assessment studies of curricula and in education information networks.

An important aim of our international research project about multigrade teaching is to describe the extent of multigrade practice in Peru, Sri Lanka and Vietnam, in order to raise awareness among policymakers and practitioners of the potential and the problems of multigrade teaching today. In this way, policy contexts that are supportive of multigrade teaching are more likely to develop. Another related aim is to establish a database of materials accessible to researchers, policymakers and practitioners world-wide and so enable research partnerships to flourish. This database is already up and running on the website, with contributions coming in from all over the world, from Alaska to Togo to Japan and beyond. These contacts have already made us aware of a wide range of contexts for and approaches to multigrade teaching and warned us against making assumptions about the benefits and needs of multigrade teaching, assumptions that research partnerships will help to dispel.

Details of the research project

The multigrade research is carried out from within the Education and International Development (EID) Group at the Institute of Education, London University. The team is led by Professor Angela Little with Dr. Pat Pridmore and Dr. Sheila Aikman as Associate Directors. The project Research Officers are Dr. Eleanore Hargreaves and Chris Berry. From Peru, Carmen Montero is the Senior Research Associate and Patricia Ames the PhD scholar. From Sri Lanka, these posts are held by Mohamedin Sibli and Manjula Vithanapathirana, respectively, and from Vietnam, Dr. Nguyen Chau and Dr. Vu Son. Takako Suzuki from Japan is also doing her PhD in the area of multigrade teaching.

In September 2000, the whole team will reconvene for our second workshop in Vietnam and Sri Lanka, where we shall visit Son Vu and Manjula Vithanapathirana in their field work case study schools. A profile of each of Peru, Sri Lanka and Vietnam respectively, written by the three scholars before they begin their field work, is given below.

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