

## **Multi-grade & Multi-class Teaching Practices in Nepal**

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### **Introduction**

Multi-grade teaching has been a practice in developed and developing countries. In a multi-grade teaching situation, a single teacher teaches more than one grade or age group. Angela Little (1995), has observed that a range of terms are used to refer to MCT/MGT, including: 'multi-level', 'composite classes', 'vertical group', 'family class,' and in the case of one-teacher schools as 'unitary schools.' This means teaching of students of different ages, grades and abilities in the same group. It was also mentioned that there are different practices in multigrade teaching, some examples, in Asian countries are: the teacher-education led developments at the school level in Sri Lanka, the Instructional Management by Parents, Community and Teachers (IMPACT) system of mass primary education conducted by the South East Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) Regional Centre for Educational Innovation and Technology (INNOTECH) in the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia and Bangladesh. There are other examples utilised in other parts of the world. Multi-grade teaching, based on experiences of various countries is the outcome of various factors: (1) sparse pupil population in a geographical area; (2) disparity in teacher deployment; (3) unwillingness of teachers to serve in rural areas; (4) high rate of absenteeism of teachers in the school; (5) teachers attending in-service training session; and (6) the decreased quality of rural education as characterised by a greater use of passive pedagogy and non-conducive environment of learning.

In 2003, the National Institute of Education, Sri Lanka, in their study, mentioned that "multi-grade teaching is an instructional arrangement demanding a situation where a school requires that children from more than one grade are taught together providing learning activities at an appropriate level for each grade, allowing all children to gain equal benefit from their learning experience."

In 1989, a study was conducted by the Asia Pacific Programme of Educational Innovation for Development (APEID) UNESCO Bangkok. The report mentioned that "multi-grade teaching is NOT an answer to meeting teacher shortage in the education systems, but a strategy to improve quality education in rural communities."

### **Multi grade / Multi class teaching in Nepal**

Nepal has made a commitment to provide "Education for All" (World Forum on Education for All, Dakar 2000). This meant ensuring access to complete, free and compulsory education of good quality by 2015. These commitments have served as an impetus for the government to establish primary schools in remote under-served and sparsely populated areas of the country. Nepal has adopted multi-grade/multi-class teaching (MGT/MCT), as a temporary adjustment to the international commitments for Education for All, and has been implemented "as a combination of classes or to cover the basic teacher absent classroom, and not in the true sense of the concept."

A study was thus conducted focused on analysing the existing practice of teaching, to draw multi-grade/multi-class situation and teacher training programmes. The study also reviewed the global concept of multi-grade teaching in order to draw the implications in the Nepalese context.

In Nepal, three types of instructional arrangements seem to dominate the instructional delivery: multi-grade teaching (MGT), multi-class teaching (MCT) and mono-grade teaching. Multi-grade, defined as teaching two or more age groups or grades together in the same classroom by the same teacher (NCED, 2003). Multi-grade teaching does not address the situation created either by chronic shortage of teachers or by casual absence of intermittent teachers. In such a situation a teacher may teach the students by combining two full size classes to meet the shortage of teachers or by placing students of two classes in different rooms by dividing his/her time between the two, leaving one class with some activities to do while attending to the other class. This practice led to the initiation of multi class teaching as a major instructional arrangement in the Nepalese context.

Different situations were found existing in Mountain, Hill and Terai regions regarding the use of instructional arrangements. Sparsely populated areas of mountain region have a low number of students creating a problem of supplying teachers as per the number of grades. Most of the classrooms in Hilly region are small like the classroom in the mountain region. But the class sizes are found larger compared to the mountain region. In Terai region where classrooms are found crowded both multi-grade and multi-class arrangements could not be effectively used. Thus the inadequate supply of teachers as per the fixed student-teacher ratio and in adequate number of classrooms has forced the use of combined teaching as a reality. Such variation observed in instructional arrangements demands a careful reflection on the education policy of the country as well. Variations were also observed in classroom management, delivery of instruction and classroom participation. Thus the need is there to identify basic specifications and requirements for effective instructional delivery in both multi-grade and multi-class setting.

### **Issues/challenges in curriculum development**

The following key issues and areas for policy implications have strong relevance to the curriculum developing process, in multi-grade or multi-class instructional arrangements:

- MGT/MCT as a pedagogic choice or compulsory practice: MGT/MCT did not appear as a pedagogic choice; rather it appeared as an unwanted reality. This has resulted into the definition of MGT/MCT as a temporary arrangement and adjustment of instructional organisation until the availability of class wise and subject-based teachers.
- Need of appropriate pedagogical training and materials: To make multi-grade teaching a pedagogic choice, appropriate pedagogical training and materials are needed for its successful implementation. Appropriate instructional strategies and change in teachers' behaviours and teaching skills are basic requirements for both the multi-grade and multi-class arrangements of instruction. Attempts have to be made to make multi-grade teaching a pedagogic choice which seems to be lacking in our context. It has been considered an alternative arrangement only for covering the gap classes caused by teachers' shortage or their absenteeism. Moreover, multi-grade teaching should also be a practice in complete teacher

schools not only in remote and unreached areas but also in towns and developed areas which have itself become an issue in our context.

- Curricular adjustment: As the existing curriculum of primary level is more subject based and grade oriented, it has little flexibility to accommodate multiple abilities of students at multi-levels or multi-ability levels. It is, therefore, in this background important to make the curriculum flexible enough to allow the teachers to organise and adjust instruction around the multi-level abilities of students in multi-grade and multi-class settings.
- Availability of educational resources and support materials in the form of teacher input: Existing educational resources do not seem to adequately supplement the qualification and experience of the MGT teacher to run classes in MGT spirit. It has raised the issue of what sort of resource materials are to be developed to address teachers' knowledge with respect to teaching in multi-grade and multi-class situation. Thus, lack of adequate resources has blocked the transformation of the acquired knowledge and skills in the classroom with MGT and MCT situation. These two situations were blended in one training programme that happened to be the cause of confusion among the teachers for appropriate instructional arrangement.
- Teacher's preparation and knowledge base: As the trainers were found with inadequate knowledge base and preparation, this inadequacy was reflected in the delivery of instruction in the MGT classroom situation. However, preparing teachers for MCT was not given due consideration.
- Dichotomy of mono-grade and multi-grade teaching: As teacher preparation seems to be focused more on subject teaching in mono grade situation than on teaching students with multilevel abilities, the teachers are confronted with the difficulties of managing multi-grade setting with mono-grade teaching techniques. Presence of multi-class situation has made the teaching more complicated for the teachers.
- Monitoring and supervision of MGT activity: Monitoring and supervision could not be developed as a feedback mechanism to ensure the transfer of MGT training in the multi-grade classroom. Even though School Supervisors and Resource Persons in the districts are responsible for the supervision of school programmes, due to the lack of adequate exposure and knowledge base in multi-grade/multi-class teaching, supervisory practices in primary schools has been a ritual. Furthermore, application of MGT teaching techniques into the classroom has been monitored very little and supervised resulting in lack of basic information about the nature, purpose and concept of MGT in its true spirit.

## **Lessons learned**

The following lessons have been learned in the implementation of multi-grade/multi-class teaching in Nepal:

- As the practice of multi-class and multi-grade is strongly prevailing in the schools of Nepal, a scientific mapping of such practice is strongly needed in order to

identify the exact number of schools with multi-class and multi-grade practices.

- MGT/MCT has been considered by majority of the teachers as an unwanted reality, on one hand and they are practicing it as a strategy to meet the problem of stop-gap teachers, on the other hand.
- MGT training proved to the teachers is found to be inadequate, on one hand and poor knowledge-base of the MGT trainers resulted into poor delivery of training with a little transfer of MGT techniques into the classroom. The basic requirements of multi-class teaching situation should be explored and adequate contents should be developed to address the needs of the teachers teaching in multi-class situation.
- As existing primary level curriculum is more subject based and grade oriented. Teachers were facing the problem of integrating the curriculum contents. Therefore a provision should be made for curricular adjustment in order to allow the teachers to organise and adjust instruction in multi-grade and multi-class settings.

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