

Teacher Perceptions on Issues of Multigrade Teaching

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Abstract

Multigrade teaching refers to teaching different grades in the same classroom setting. It is not unique to India but is common in many developed and developing countries across the world. Sometimes, multigrade teaching is seen as a pedagogic tool that can assist in times of teacher shortage, budget constraints, etc. In many countries, multigrade teaching is practised in schools mostly situated in rural and sparsely populated areas. The provision of education in multigrade schools is limited by a number of challenges, which negatively affect the quality of teaching and learning. Many teachers feel that multigrade teaching is more demanding and complex than mono-grade teaching. Teachers, teaching in these schools, have only been trained in mono-grade pedagogy, and therefore, lack the knowledge and skills to effectively deal with multigrade classes. In order to improve the quality of education in multigrade schools, teachers need to be imparted training in multigrade teaching.

INTRODUCTION

Multigrade teaching has both demographic and educational relevance. It plays an important role in sparsely populated areas, which are relatively inaccessible having difficult population contexts. The stage of primary education is a period when a child forms and strengthens one's self-concept, which is influenced by

the learning environment of the school, as well as, learners' participation. Here comes in the role of teachers.

Multigrade teaching is a challenge. It requires commitment, ingenuity and effort on the part of teachers working in multigrade schools. The success indicators could be comprehensive coverage of children in class and increase in their achievement level.

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Multigrade teaching is more challenging in single-teacher schools. Research and experimentation on multigrade teaching have yielded the relevance of adopting restructured approach in curriculum transaction, preparation and use of substantial variety of self-learning material, and creation of learner friendly school environment.

This article is based on a research study conducted to explore issues related to teaching-learning in 20 multigrade schools in Jaipur district of Rajasthan. Head teachers and in-charge head teachers from the selected 20 schools participated in the study.

CONCEPT OF MULTIGRADE TEACHING

Multigrade teaching in developing countries like India is common. Sometimes, the number of children in each class of a school is quite low. As per the Right To Education (RTE) Act 2009, the teacher-pupil ratio at the primary level should be 1:30. If the total enrolment in a school is 60, only two teachers will be provided, which means each class will get one dedicated teacher. Usually, the posting of teachers is done on the basis of teacher-pupil ratio as per the State rules. In multigrade contexts, pupils of several grades together add up to the normal class size. Combining children of some grades with a teacher to make a possible class size leads to multigrade teaching.

Multigrade contexts vary in various countries across the world.

In some countries like Nepal, one teacher teaches children of more than one grade together, may be in same or different classrooms. In Malaysia, too, a single teacher accommodates children of two or more levels in one classroom. In Pakistan, children of more than three levels are combined and taught by a single teacher (Birch and Lally, 1995). In India, too, multigrade situations are faced by almost all teachers, especially, in government-run primary schools. Even in schools that are otherwise mono-grade, teachers are faced with multigrade situations for various reasons.

PROBLEMS FACED BY TEACHERS IN MULTIGRADE CLASSROOMS

The research tools were developed after an extensive study of articles related to multigrade teaching in various printed and online journals. The situation within the country helped in contextualising factors explored through the research tools. Though the study explored factors related to infrastructure available in multigrade schools and those influencing teaching-learning activities, this article gives an insight into teachers' opinions on various factors affecting the teaching-learning process in multigrade schools. The factors were organised under three categories.

- Factors related to teaching-learning process
- Factors related to classroom environment and management
- Factors related to children

Factors related to teaching-learning process

Teaching-learning at the primary stage is critical as it develops learning style and curiosity for learning among children. It is the primary years that lay the foundation of learning among children. Therefore, the pedagogy of teaching and learning plays a crucial role during these years. Teaching-learning is a two-way process that includes various steps. In this process, the teachers and students are expected to work towards achieving the learning outcomes, which need to be holistic and integrated. A teacher assesses the learning needs of the students and establishes certain learning objectives. Keeping the objectives in mind, the teacher develops teaching-learning strategies to implement the plan of action, and finally, evaluates the outcomes of the plan. The students throughout

the process gain information and knowledge by studying, practising and practically understanding the intended learning outcomes. The nature of this process differs across classrooms, depending on varied experiences of the teachers and students.

The responses of the teachers against some identified and researched issues that may exist in multigrade classrooms have been shown in the following diagrams under the three identified categories as discussed earlier.

The bar graph in Figure 1 shows the problems faced by teachers as regards to teaching-learning in multigrade schools. It can be observed that heavy workload on teachers is the biggest problem in multigrade schools as shared by 90 per cent respondents. They said that excess workload stopped them from devoting enough time to students.

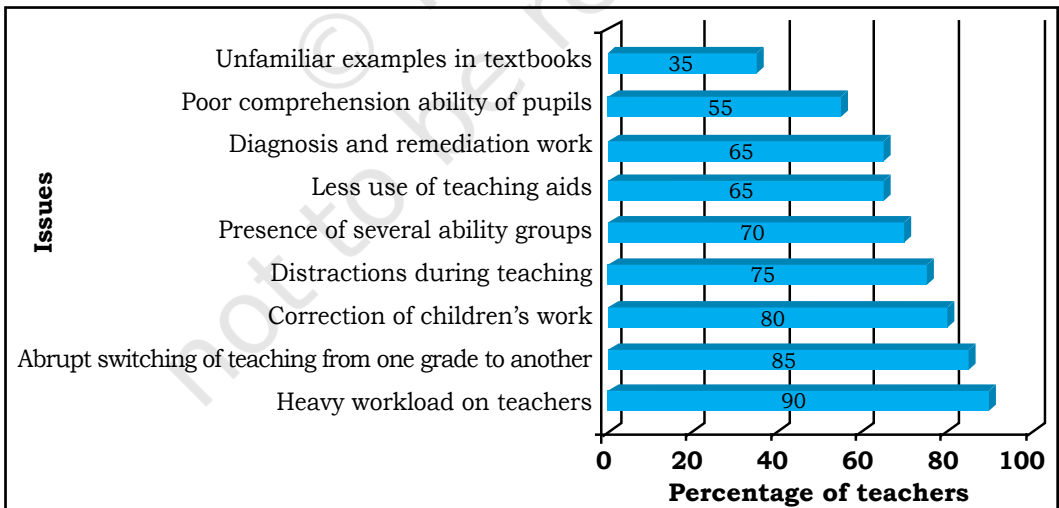


Figure 1: Teaching-learning issues in multigrade classrooms

According to 85 per cent teachers, abrupt switching of teaching from one grade to another was also a persistent problem in multigrade schools. Regular correction of work done by children from various grades and providing them with feedback daily in the same classroom setting was another major problem as shared by 80 per cent teachers. This hampers the process of diagnosis of the problems as faced by many children and finding a solution to these as informed by 65 per cent teachers.

Seventy-five per cent teachers expressed that interruption and distractions during teaching diverted teachers' attention, which adversely affected the quality of instruction. Sixty-five per cent teachers shared that they were not able to use teaching aids adequately as there were several classes running at the same time and in the same space. Children of other classes also got distracted if teaching aids and other support material were used in class.

Sometimes, teachers continuously teach one grade without apportioning time for other(s). Besides, problems, such as unstructured or vague responses by pupils, their inability to understand questions or topics and unfamiliar examples given in textbooks were reported as significant problems faced by the teachers during the teaching-learning process.

Factors related to classroom environment and management

Classroom environment implies the overall atmosphere of a classroom

that has direct or indirect impact on classroom activities and students. This includes appearance of the classroom, physical arrangement of tables and chairs, and other teaching-learning aids, as well as, psychological or emotional aspects, i.e., approach of teachers towards students, welcoming atmosphere for students, print-rich walls of the classroom (consisting of paintings, posters, artwork by children), etc.

It can be observed from Figure 2 that all teachers have reported heavy workload as a major factor adversely affecting the classroom environment. The interaction with the teachers helped the researchers understand their workload. They shared that apart from teaching, teachers in primary schools were also responsible for distributing milk and midday meals to children, and also maintain a daily record of consumption as regards to these schemes (In Rajasthan, in addition to the midday meal scheme, children in primary schools are also given milk in the morning. Milk distribution is a State scheme). The teachers also had to maintain a record of free distribution of uniform and books given to the children. They also had to attend important meetings and training programmes, which implies further increase in workload. All these factors caused disruption in the teaching-learning process. As a result, the message received by parents and community, at large, was that no studies were carried out in government schools.

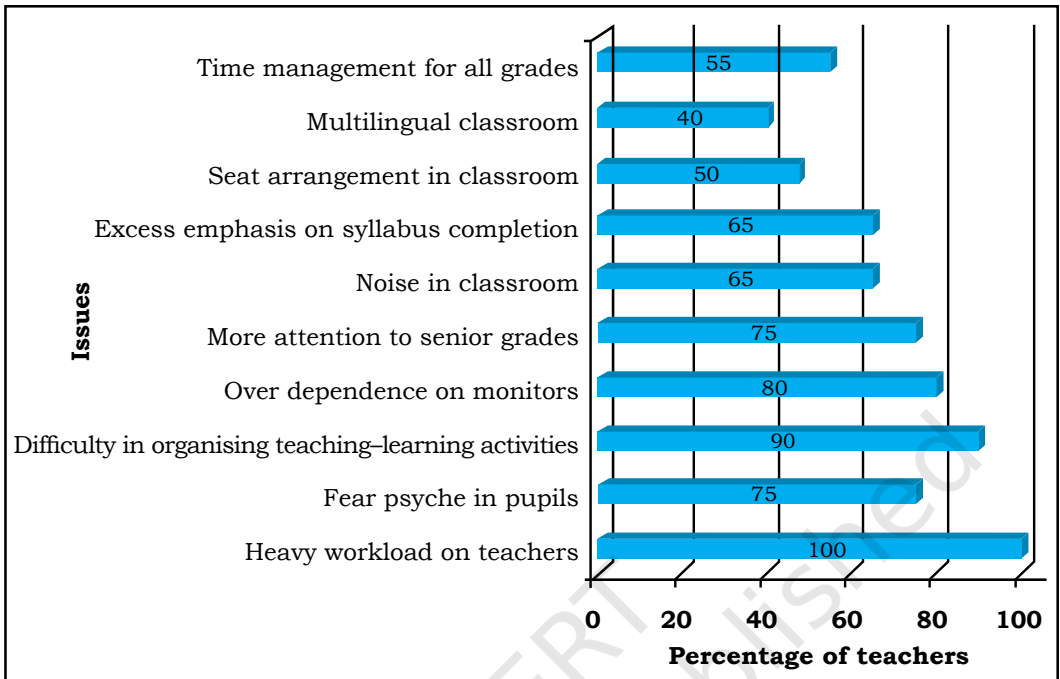


Figure 2: Issues related to classroom environment

According to 90 per cent teachers, another factor that adversely affected the classroom environment was difficulty in organising teaching-learning activities. In primary level classes, activity-based teaching-learning, learning through concrete experiences and learning by doing are considered as important components of pedagogy. Due to shortage of space and time, the teachers were not able to adequately utilise teaching aids in the classrooms.

Eighty per cent teachers said they were immensely dependent on class monitors and 75 per cent shared that they were expected to devote more attention to children of senior classes. Besides these, other factors

cited by the teachers that adversely affected the classroom environment were noise in the classroom, fear psyche of the pupils, inadequate and disorderly seating arrangements, presence of pupils speaking different languages in the same classroom and disabilities in some children. Pressure for completing the syllabus without ensuring if it is being grasped by the children was also cited as a major factor adversely affecting the classroom environment and teaching-learning process.

Factors related to children

The researchers, with the help of the teachers, also tried to identify factors related to children that hampered the

teaching-learning process. Though all factors — whether related to teaching-learning or classroom environment — affected the teaching-learning process and performance of children, yet there were certain factors, which affected them directly. These factors, as per the responses of teachers, have been depicted in Figure 3.

The most important factor affecting children directly is that children of different grades sit together under one roof. It causes distraction. If the teacher takes classes one-by-one, then it is all the more distractive because children

of other classes become inattentive, and hence, get restless and start disturbing other students. This was shared by about 90 per cent teachers.

Seventy per cent teachers said that they had inadequate teaching-learning aids and material as compared to the number of children studying in a class. This restricted self-learning and involvement by children. Sixty-five per cent teachers said that children were unable to cope up with the load of learning and studies also got hampered due to lack of communication between parents and teachers.

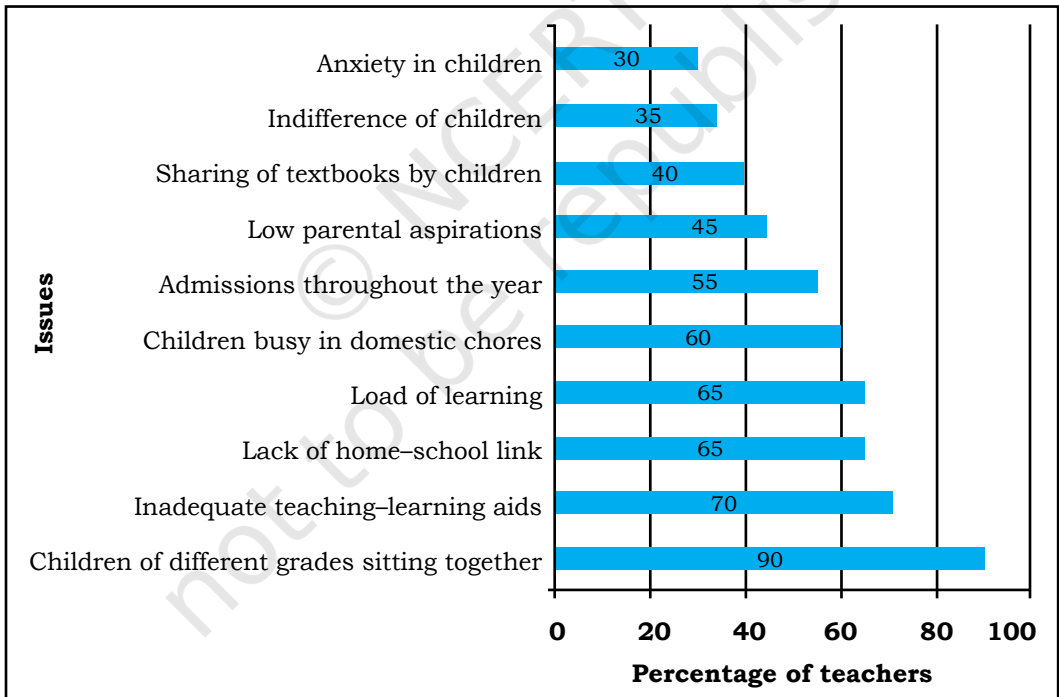


Figure 3: Issues affecting children directly

Sixty per cent teachers viewed that children were, generally, expected to help their parents in day-to-day life at home, including household chores. This distracted them from studies. Low parental aspirations for the future of children was also pointed out as a major issue affecting the studies of children by about 45 per cent teachers.

Fifty-five per cent teachers opined that keeping admissions open throughout the year caused a major problem for existing children in a classroom due to the difference between their and the new students' learning level. This posed a major challenge for the teachers in multigrade schools. Sharing of textbooks by children was also seen a limiting factor, according to 40 per cent teachers. The children were not able to revise the lessons after school and during free time in school hours due to several distractions. The other reasons indicated by the teachers were indifference towards learning, and uncertainty about their future studies and settlement in life.

CONCLUSION

The multigrade teaching situation as shared by teachers of 20 selected schools in Jaipur district of Rajasthan is disheartening and needs immediate attention of the government and policy makers. Children from poor economic background in rural areas mostly study in multigrade schools.

The teachers shared that they did not get any kind of input for making optimal use of the teaching-learning time in multigrade situations during their pre- or in-service training. Only six out of 20 teachers said they got slight training on handling multigrade classroom situation during their in-service training programme.

Teacher preparation for handling multigrade situations is required on many aspects. It needs to be introduced in the pre-service teacher training curriculum, as well as, in-service teacher education programmes. Teacher trainers must be trained to develop integrated lesson plans for a combination of classes. During internship, student-teachers must be sent to multigrade schools for on-the-job training, which will prepare them to handle multigrade classrooms.

Pupil evaluation like regular primary schools is, generally, not conducted in single-teacher schools in multigrade teaching context due to shortage of time, apart from other factors. Generally, junior classes face neglect for want of teacher's time. Secondly, teachers focus more on scholastic subjects in senior classes. The evaluation policy, procedures and programmes need a review and special design for multigrade context. These need to be based on class-wise learning outcomes — general and subject-wise.

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