

Understanding School Leaders' Challenges and Needs in THE Management of Multigrade Classrooms

Jeffri Idris

Institut Aminuddin Baki, Ministry of Education, Malaysia

Abstract.

The study focused on the problems faced by school heads and ways to support them in implementing the practice of multigrade teaching. A new policy was recently introduced in the country where public primary schools with pupils' enrolment of 30 and below had to implement multigrade teaching. Until now, it has been implemented for more than a year that involved 393 schools. A qualitative study was carried out to identify the problems they were still facing and the types of support required by them. The study used an online form sent to their e-mails. Sixty-eight school heads' open-ended questions responses were used in the analysis. Analyses were based on two major themes namely the challenges and the supports. Both major themes were then given sub-themes to be more focused. Overall, it was found that the major challenges were related to teachers' knowledge and skills, pupils' ability and resources. Based on the analysis, it was suggested that continued support to be provided to the schools in terms of the school leaders' management and leadership aspects. Also, pedagogical competency, curriculum integration and resources management skills of the teachers needed to be supported.

Keywords: multigrade teaching; school leadership; small schools; qualitative approach

Introduction

Multigrade teaching is a practice implemented by schools in various countries from all parts of the world. It could be an approach or strategy besides using the normal practice of monograde teaching. In Malaysia, multigrade teaching with standardized guidelines has been made compulsory for government schools with student enrolment of 30 and below for more than a year ago. Standardized guidelines on various aspects related to multigrade teaching and management were prepared by the Ministry of Education as reference for the schools. Prior to this implementation, the school heads and teachers were given trainings to prepare them. In the implementation process, feedbacks from them were gathered as a means to identify problems or issues faced by the schools. Initial findings concluded that the multigrade teaching practice among the schools needed to be further developed and improved. Therefore, the study is carried out to gather information on challenges faced and identify possible measures to overcome them.

Background Of The Study

The education system in Malaysia has introduced a new policy on multigrade teaching practice for all government schools since 2018. Under this policy, all primary schools with pupils' enrolment of 30 and below were required to set up 'combined classrooms' for multigrade teaching. The practice was that Year 2 and Year 3 pupils were combined in a classroom while Year 4 and Year 5 in another classroom. Year 1 and Year 6 pupils were to remain as a monograde classroom. This new policy involved 393 schools in the country. This policy did not include the indigenous schools and special education schools.

These 393 schools were among other schools categorized as under-enrolled or small schools. Schools with enrollment of 150 and below were categorized as under-enrolled by the government. The multigrade teaching practice was actually part of the country's education long term planning of empowering all under-enrolled schools in the country. It was hoped that this implementation helped in enhancing the efficiency of teachers' workforce.

There were four main responsibilities expected to be carried out by the school heads in implementing the multigrade practice. These were:

- i. Providing infrastructure and infostructure aspects of multigrade classrooms.
- ii. Identifying teachers' expertise area and managing multigrade classes time table.
- iii. Providing in-service training series to enhance their teachers' skills in multigrade teaching.
- iv. Disseminating information to parents on the implementation of multigrade teaching.

Prior to the implementation of this policy, special trainings had been given to all the school heads on the management and pedagogical aspects of multigrade teaching. These included courses and consultations carried out in phases and continued after the implementation. Basically, the training contents given were knowledge and practical aspects of the concept of multigrade teaching, their roles, classroom management, curriculum management, time table management and teaching and learning strategies. On-site consultations were also provided to selected schools to assist their management team and teachers.

Problem Statement

Initial findings based on responses gathered from the consultations and reports from the schools' respective states and districts education authorities revealed that the implementation of multigrade teaching was still not satisfactory. This was actually expected considering that the implementation just started a year before. In addition, not all of the selected schools started the practice at the same time. Some schools were allowed to start the practice later due to their own reasons.

It was also identified that some of them did not implement it according to trainings and guidelines given to them especially in terms of the classroom arrangement, lesson planning, time management and curriculum integration. It could be understood that the management and teachers were still in the process of understanding the concept and developing the skills of multigrade teaching. This was because a majority of them did not have the experience before except those who started their teaching career from the late 1980's until 1990's. During these years, schools were allowed to implement multigrade teaching according to their own way of practice because there were no specific guidelines provided. The most reason for this practice was a lack of teachers.

Objectives Of The Study

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of the challenges and needs of school heads in managing and leading multigrade teaching. There were two main objectives identified to fulfil the purpose:

1. To identify the problems faced by the school heads in regards to multigrade teaching management.
2. To identify the needs required by the school heads in regards to multigrade teaching management.

Literature Review

Multigrade teaching is practised by schools in all parts of the world for many reasons. Hyry-Beihammer and Hascher (2015) reported that multigrade teaching had to be implemented in rural areas because of the declining number of student enrollment and to avoid the schools from being closed. Economical factor was also another reason to implement multigrade teaching according to them. Malaysia, like other countries in Southeast Asia except Brunei and Singapore, multigrade teaching practice was regarded as a necessity rather than choice (SEAMEO INNOTECH, 2012). Perhaps, the most important reason for multigrade teaching practice was to realize the Education for All (EFA) targets set by UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) (Thephavongsa, 2018).

Multigrade teaching practice had its own advantages. Perry, Love and Mckay (2017) reported that the lower-age group pupils could benefit from support given by their upper-age group peers. The upper-age group pupils could also benefit by having more opportunity to strengthen their prior knowledge, develop their leadership skills and practice independent learning. While, based on Pistoli (2018), children in multigrade classes were able to develop higher self-concept, better social behaviour and more positive interpersonal relationships.

Similarly, Mortazavizadeh, et al. (2017) have listed out five advantages for multigrade teaching practice. These were:

- i. Helped children realizing their right to education that enabled them to learn what they needed.
- ii. Cost-effective for disadvantaged children.
- iii. Encouraged the children to work positively with their peers that enhanced their interpersonal and social skills.
- iv. Helped teachers to plan their lessons and manage their time effectively and efficiently.
- v. Helped developed the children's cognitive development.

There were also challenges in implementing the multigrade teaching. Teachers were not only to deal with different age groups but a variety and diversity of their pupils' needs (Hyry-Beihammer & Hascher, 2015) According to Perry et al. (2017), curriculum integration, ability gaps, assessment, time and increased workload were the challenges that teachers needed to deal with. Lack of instructional materials and insufficient teachers' knowledge and skills were other challenges identified by Nkoro, Emoruwa, and Erinsakin (2014).

Moreover, Du Plesis and Subramanien (2014) posited that curriculum and support were two major issues in multigrade teaching. Teachers were required to use the standard monograde curriculum and realigned it in their teaching and learning strategies. Lack of support was identified to be a vital factor in ensuring the success of multigrade teaching practice. Another challenge that could be faced by the school was behavioral problems according to Sattari (2016). The study claimed that there was a strong relationship between pupils' behaviour and long term outcomes.

A study on eight Southeast Asian countries namely Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia, the Philippines, Myanmar, Cambodia and Timur Leste by SEAMEO INNOTECH (2012) revealed that teachers were not competent enough to use different approaches and strategies in dealing with multiage pupils. This has impacted the quality of teaching and learning process. This was also agreed by Thephavongsa (2018) who specifically studied how teachers in Laos, another Southeast Asian country, carried out the multigrade teaching. Thephavongsa concluded that the teachers had insufficient knowledge and skills in handling the activities, lack of confidence and unable to prepare an effective lesson plan.

SEAMEO INNOTECH (2012) has also reported that multigrade teaching pruned to be negatively viewed by the stakeholders especially in developing countries. It further explained that this could be due to problems related to implementation, awareness, curriculum adaptation, learning materials and teacher preparation. It stressed that the implementation to be reviewed so that suggested policy, research agenda and capacity building could be identified to improve the practice of multigrade teaching. Specifically, the suggestions were:

1. Change the stakeholders' negative perceptions.
2. Include a policy on multigrade teaching at micro and macro levels
3. Improve learning environments and resources.
4. Improve instructional techniques and provide teacher support

5. Consider multigrade classes learning context and provide a variety of modalities when planning for assessment at national level.

In terms of student outcomes, it was found that there were no significant differences in academic achievements between children in multigrade classes and those in monograde classes. A study by Thomas (2012) that involved nearly 10,000 children proved that their performance in the multigrade classes did not differ much with those in monograde classes. Based on Perry et al. (2017), a study of 857 schools in Republic of Ireland found that reading and Maths test scores were not associated with multigrade classes. In spite of this, Checchi and Paula (2017) reported different findings regarding the student outcomes between multigrade classes and monograde classes. They found that 5th Grade pupils in multigrade classes performed worse than their counterparts in monograde classes for literacy and numeracy scores. This was especially for the numeracy scores where the difference was highly statistically significant.

On the contrary, a study by ul Haq et al. (2017) revealed the opposite results as compared to Thomas (2012), Perry et al. (2017) and Checchi and Paula (2017). Findings from an experimental study conducted by them discovered that the performance from monograde teaching children was better from multigrade teaching. The researchers suggested that teachers to be given in-service trainings to enhance their teaching strategy if multigrade teaching practice was to continued.

Methodology

The study used a qualitative approach to get a better understanding on the extent of challenges experienced by the school heads and the types of support to be provided for them. Data were collected from three open-ended questions formulated based on the objectives of the study. These were:

1. What are the obstacles or problems you face in implementing the multigrade teaching?
2. What are the training and support aspects that you still need in implementing the multigrade teaching?
3. How do you think the multigrade teaching practice could be improved?

Based on Singer and Couper (2017), the purposes of using the open-ended questions for this study were to understand reasons for reluctance, encourage more truthful answers and provide an opportunity for feedback. Responses from open-ended questions could be regarded as respondents' direct views into their own thinking without being guided as in closed-ended questions (Roberts, et al., 2014).

The questions were prepared using a web-based *Google Forms* platform and sent to the respondents via e-mails. Their e-mail addresses were collected from the forms they filled in when attending the multigrade classrooms trainings. All the responses were downloaded from the website as a spreadsheet for analysis purposes.

Data analysis was carried out based on the framework introduced by Braun and Clark for identifying relevant themes (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). There were six steps to be followed in the framework:

1. Become familiar with the data – this involves the process of reading for several times, writing notes and jotting down initial impressions.

2. Generate initial codes – data is organised in a meaningful and systematic way by assigning codes to reduce them into small chunks of meaning.
3. Search for themes – a theme can be characterised by its significance. All the codes identified before need to be examined thoroughly to come up with a general idea of the codes.
4. Review themes – this involves the process of reviewing, modifying and developing the initial themes to ensure they are clear, making sense, relevant and not overlap..
5. Define themes – this is done for the purpose of refining the themes by really understanding the inter-relatedness of all the themes.
6. Write-up – report the findings.

The respondents for the study were primary school heads whose schools were selected to implement the multigrade teaching. Most of them had less than five years' experience as school heads. This was expected because a majority of school heads in small schools were newly appointed.

Data were gathered solely from responses in the downloaded spreadsheet. All the responses were rearranged and sorted. They were then coded to assign relevant themes. After several reviews, the themes were finalized and defined.

Findings

The study involved 68 primary school heads who agreed to participate after being contacted through their e-mails. They comprised 54.4 percents males and 45.6 percent females with almost all of their schools (95.6%) were of rural category. These school heads comprised three main types of government schools as shown in the following table:

Table 1: Respondents' types of school

Types of School	%
National Primary Schools	36.8
National Type Vernacular Schools (Chinese Language Medium)	38.2
National Type Vernacular Schools (Tamil Language Medium)	25

Table 1 shows the respondents' types of school. They represented all the three types of school namely National School (36.8%), Chinese National School Type (38.2%) and Tamil National School Type (25%). Briefly, Malaysian education system consists of two mainstreams government schools. These are national schools and vernacular schools but they follow the same standardizad curriculum and syllabus. The only different is that national schools use the national language, which is Malay language as their medium of instruction, while the latter use ethnic languages, which are either Chinese or Tamil as their medium of instruction. Students' enrollment for the vernacular schools are mostly from the respective ethnic but there are also students from other ethnicities choose to enrol in the schools.

The followings are statements of findings based on responses given by the school heads from the three open-ended questions provided.

Findings for Research Question 1: What are the obstacles or problems you face in implementing the multigrade teaching?

It was discovered that the most obvious obstacle in multigrade teaching that the respondents viewed was time constraints especially during the teaching and learning activities. They felt that it was a big challenge for teachers to carry out two lesson plans simultaneously. They did not think that teachers could allocate enough time for both groups.

It was also revealed that teachers had difficulty to prepare their daily lesson plans. They had to consume longer time than before to prepare two sets of lesson based on curriculum guidelines. They also had to consider relevant activities and learning materials.

Besides, the respondents also highlighted that there were subjects which were difficult to be taught in multigrade classroom. These were the language subjects, Mathematics, Science, History and Design and Technology.

Findings for Research Question 2: What are the training and support aspects that you still need in implementing the multigrade teaching?

It was found that the respondents continuous trainings and assistance in various aspects of multigrade teaching in terms of its managerial and pedagogical implementation. They needed to be trained the skills of teaching pupils with different age groups and abilities.

The respondents also requested their expert trainers to demonstrate the proper way to carry out multigrade teaching in an actual classroom setting. They wanted their teachers to observe and learn from these experts. Therefore, they suggested these trainers to go to their schools for the purpose.

Findings for Research Question 3: How do you think the multigrade teaching practice could be improved?

The followings were suggestions by the respondents on how to improve the practice of multigrade teaching:

1. Develop a special curriculum for multigrade classroom.
2. Provide advanced courses for school heads and teachers.
3. Allocate more monetary budget.
4. Create groups to exchange views and opinions.
5. Give less non-classroom teaching responsibilities that required much managerial work.
6. Give exceptions for teachers to get involved in co-curricular and extra-curricular activities.
7. Prepare more teaching and learning materials.
8. Create collaboration among schools at district level.

Discussion

The study was carried out to identify the problems and needs of school heads in managing multigrade teaching. Data were gathered from three open-ended questions responded by the

school heads using an on-line platform. A thematic analysis approach was used to achieve the objectives.

Based on the findings, it can be said that teachers mostly faced difficulty in their time management as viewed by the school heads. This is in particular when planning the lessons and carrying out the classroom activities. Planning a lesson is a vital stage in teaching and learning and this has to be done thoughtfully. Planning a lesson in multigrade teaching is undeniably more challenging because the teachers need to combine two lessons from two grades into one. This could affect the teachers' time management when conducting the lessons. Lack of experience and skills could also relate with the time management aspect.

Also, it can be regarded that the school heads viewed certain subjects were difficult to be taught in multigrade classroom. This finding could be both true and false. It could be false considering the fact that the teachers involved were still inexperienced and incompetent that they assumed some subjects were not suitable to be taught in multigrade setting.

However, it can be said that all these obstacles tended to be temporal considering that it was a new experience for them. These obstacles could be overcome gradually as they gained more experience and developed their skills throughout the process.

In terms of their needs, there were two main types of training and support the school heads required. Firstly, they needed additional courses focusing on all the pedagogical aspects of multigrade teaching. This was agreed because the courses they attended before were mainly meant to give them basic knowledge and exposure. Secondly, the school heads required the training on the practical aspects of multigrade teaching. They wanted expert trainers to show them in a real classroom teaching situation how a multigrade teaching should be carried out.. This could be an effective step because teachers were able learn it first hand and face-to-face.

There were also other needs specified by the respondents that could not be possibly fulfilled. One of them was to develop a special curriculum for multigrade teaching. Like most other countries that implementing multigrade teaching, the curricula used were similar to respective grade levels in monograde teaching (Du Plessis and Subramanien, 2014; HyryBeihammer & Hascher, 2015; Ramrathan & Mzimela, 2016; Mortazavizadeh, et al., 2017 & Perry, Love and Mckay, 2017). However, in Malaysia context, standardized procedures and guidelines were provided to assist the schools implementing the multigrade teaching accordingly. Curriculum mappings were provided in which guidelines were given on how to teach the subjects in multigrade instructions. For example, by selecting similar theme, similar topic or similar skills. Guidelines were also provided on the management aspects of multigrade teaching in terms of classroom management, grouping arrangements and resources management. This also included suggestions on possible teaching and learning strategies.

Another suggestion by the respondents that could not be possibly fulfilled was to allocate more financial budget to them. This could not be fulfilled because the implementation of the multigrade classrooms policy did not take into consideration of allocating a special budget. In fact, one of the purposes to introduce the multigrade teaching was to fulfill the need of following the cost-effective school management practices.

Conclusion and Recommendations

It can be concluded that the newly introduced multigrade teaching policy has been implemented accordingly by all the affected schools. However, its practice was still not being carried effectively and efficiently. There existed challenges to be dealt with and this required substantial involvement from various parties to assist the school heads in managing the implementation of multigrade teaching successfully.

Therefore, it was recommended that:

1. Further training to be given to the school heads focusing more on the strategical aspects of identifying intervention initiatives. The training should be focusing more on change management aspects. They need to be assisted on how to assess and evaluate their current practices to enable them to identify problems and make interventions. Strategic planning should be emphasized at this stage.
2. Professional Learning Community (PLC) practice to be intensified by all the schools that focusing more on the multigrade teaching pedagogy. PLC activities are regularly carried out by all of the schools since they are a requirement. Therefore, the schools need to plan PLC activities that aimed at improving their teachers' skills in multigrade teaching and management.
3. Schools with best practices of multigrade teaching to be identified and benchmarked as a marketing strategy to other schools. In this respect, the District Education Department need to collect data and identify the highly potential schools, especially those who are able to make innovations. These schools and teachers should be acknowledged and awarded to enable others to learn from them.
4. Collaboration and cooperation initiatives among the schools in the community, districts, states and national levels to be intensified and managed systematically.
5. More coaching-based approach to be provided for the school heads focusing on managing and leading multigrade teaching. The School Improvement Partners (SIP) and School Improvement Specialist Coaches at all the District Education Departments are vital in ensuring the success of multigrade teaching implementation. They need to visit the schools more regularly to help the school heads and teachers in every aspect of multigrade teaching and management.
6. More on-site school visits by experts to be provided to low performing schools in terms of their implementation aspects. The District Education Departments should also collect data and identify the low performing schools. Experts from not only the SIPs and SISCs should visit the schools and help to improve their practices. These experts could be lecturers from school leadership institutions, teacher training institutes and universities.
7. Review policy on compulsory involvement for the schools in co-curricular and extracurricular activities to help ease their work load. It is a requirement for schools to be involved in these activities at district level, at least. They have to bring their pupils to take part in competitions and tournaments or their teachers are called for duties. These schools do not afford to get involved in various events because of the small number of pupils and teachers. It is recommended that these schools to be given exemption and to choose a minimum number of activities to take part.

References

- Checchi, D. & De Paula, M. (2017). *The effect of multigrade classes on cognitive and noncognitive skills: Causal evidence exploiting minimum class size rules in Italy*: IZA Discussion Paper
- Du Plesis, A. & Subramanien, B. (2014). Voices of despair: Challenges for multigrade teachers in a rural district in South Africa. *Educational Research for Social Change (ERSC)*,3, 1, 20-36.
- Hyry-Beihammer, E. & Hascher, T. (2015). Multi-grade teaching practices in Austrian and Finnish primary schools. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 74, 104–113. doi:10.1016/j.ijer.2015.07.002
- Maguire, M. & Delahunt, B. (2017). Doing a thematic analysis: A practical, step-by-step guide for learning and teaching scholars. *All Ireland Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 8, 3, 3351 – 33514.
- Mortazavizadeh, S. M., Nili, M. R., Isfahani, A. R. N & Hassani, M. (2017). Teachers' lived experiences about teaching-learning process in multi-grade classes. *Journal of Education and Learning*, 6, 4.
- Nkoro, Emoruwa & Erinsakin. (2014). *The prospects and challenges of multigrade teaching approach in secondary schools in Nigeria*. Paper presented at International Conference on Arts, Economics and Management (ICAEM'14) March 22-23 (pp 50-52). Dubai (UAE)
- Perry, C., Love, B & McKay, K. (2017). *Composite classes*. Available at <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/raise/publications/20162021/2017/education/0517.pdf>.
- Pistioli, E. (2018). The self-concept in specific areas of students attending multigrade and single grade elementary schools. Comparative approach. *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research*, 17, 12, 116-134.
- Ramrathan, L. & Mzimela, J. (2016). Teaching reading in a multigrade class: Teachers' adaptive skills and teacher agency in teaching across grade R and grade 1. *South African Journal of Childhood Education*, 6, 2, 1-8.
- Roberts, M. E., Stewart, B. M., Tingley, D., Lucas, C., Leder-Luis, J., Gadarian, S., Albertson, B., & Rand, D. (2014). Structural topic models for open-ended survey responses. *American Journal of Political Science*, 58, 4, 1064–1082.
- SEAMEO INNOTECH. (2012). *Quality indicators of multigrade instruction in southeast asia*. Available from <http://www.seameo-innotech.org/>
- Sattari, R. (2016). *The effect of multigrade classrooms on student behavior*. Available at <https://www.sole-jole.org/17489.pdf>.

- Singer, E. & Couper, M.P. (2017). Some methodological uses of responses to open questions and other verbatim comments in quantitative surveys. *Methods, Data, Analyses*, 11, 2, 115-134.
- Thephavongsa, S. (2018). Enhancing the teaching skills of the multi-grade teachers through lesson study. *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research*, 17, 4, 71-87.
- Thomas, J.L. (2012) Combination classes and educational achievement. *Economics of Education Review*, 31, 1058-1066.
- ul Haq, G.N, Farooq, R.A & Tabassum, R. (2017). Comparison of multi-grade teaching with mono-grade teaching at primary level. *Journal of Applied Environmental and Biological Sciences*, 7, 12, 316-322.