

Multi-grade classes teaching methods

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Abstract: This paper aims to deal with the definition of multi-grade classes, its history in Iran and the world, learning objectives of these classes, the causes of using these classes in Iran, teaching style in these classes considering the presence of special students, problems, limitations, and disadvantages of this type of classes, the need for this type of classes regarding the demographic situation, roles and responsibilities of teachers in these classes, and the goals of these classes. This study tries to slightly help the teachers to manage multi-grade classes better and resolve part of education system in relation to these classes. We hope that this small effort will be accepted by God, education system, dear and hardworking teachers of educations system and multi-grade classes.

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1. Introduction

Every country and nation tries to educate their children by their own education system, because it is believed, experience and knowledge have proven it, and that no nation can move ahead of its culture. Hence, in every country including Iran, there are regions in which the number of students in each grade is very small and occasionally there are only one or two students in each grade. According to the importance of this issue, education systems has established multi-grade classes in these region in order to educate the children and follow the educational justice(Wesmood, P (1997). The need for multi-grade classes is an inevitable reality in education system of our country. Environmental adverse conditions, shortage of students, manpower shortage, insufficient educational space, voluntary or forced migration, various financial and economic problems, distant villages, and lack of sufficient resources are factors that restrict the possibility to establish educational units with single-grade classes (Collingwood, I. (1992). Hence, familiarity of officials with multi-grade classes, the course of their development, principles of learning in these classes, and professional features and limitations of multi-grade classes is essential. On the other hand, expansion of multi-grade classes from elementary schools to guidance schools requires more extensive research in order to identify and assess the problems of the existing problems of teaching in these classes. Providing more appropriate teaching methods, identifying and resolving the educational problems of teachers and holding on-the-job training courses, and comparative-analytical study of multi-grade classes in various countries around the world can be also effective in this regard.

1.1. Definition of multi-grade classes:

A class which is attended by students of two or more grades, taught by one teacher, and held in one classroom is called a multi-grade class and multi-grade education is the opportunities in which students varying in age and ability all are trained in one class. Organizationally, multi-grade education can be done in many forms, from a set of common educational grades under the supervision of one teacher to educational units that are essentially devoid of any grading. Therefore, multi-grade schools are the opposite of traditional schools in which the students of each grade are educated in a separate classroom and with a special teacher. One of the requirements of success in multi-grade education is a set of teaching techniques and skills that make it possible to teachers to effectively teach the students varying in age and educational abilities (McEwan, P.J. (1998).

1.2. The history of multi-grade classes:

A) In Iran:

With a little research in the history of education it can be found that multi-grade classes are as old as the onset of collective education. Before qualitative and quantitative changes in education and the development of new methods (classical and planned education in a modern form), education system was an education tailored to the current needs and values at any time and influenced and overwhelmed by governments, regimes, societies, sects, and even families. Isa Sedigh, in his book named "History of Iran's Culture", points out that the history of multi-grade education date back to the years 250 to 260 (According to Solar Hijri calendar). He mentions schools as one of the educational institutions in the past and writes, "School was an institution at which Quran reading and reading and

writing were taught. Schools were held in mosques, teacher's home, shops, and so on. Individual education was used in schools. The teacher first taught the older student and then asked them to teach smaller students what they had learned (WGTP (2005). After the development of modern education system, schools were considered informal and their number decreased with the establishment of a number of elementary schools until 1976 that there was no record of schools in official statistics.

B) In the world:

Prior to the Industrial Revolution and urbanization, multi-grade education was the most widespread form of education in North America. Oversight and assistance system, in which older and more advanced students helped other students and monitored their progress, are and old tradition. Multi-grade education is still of great importance in many parts of North America and Europe, especially in villages and towns around big cities. Multi-grade education provides valuable services in counties and villages of Scotland, Canada, France, the U.S., and Scandinavian countries (Little, A. (1995)). There are more than 420000, 20000, and 1540 multi-grade single-room schools in China, Indonesia, and Malaysia. 8% of schools in Philippines and 37% of elementary schools in India have only one or two teachers. In 22% of schools in Mexico, students of 6 grades are taught in a single classroom. Multi-grade education is very common in the Pacific island countries, in which small groups isolated from other people live. The number of such schools (Multi-grade classes) is increasing in most European countries (Murdoch, D., & Schiller, J. (200).

A new survey in the Netherlands shows that 29% of all elementary grades have students varying in age. Another study in the North West of England also indicates that there is a kind of grouping of various ages in 66% of studied schools (Mohr, N., Dichter, A. (2001).

1.3. Objectives of multi-grade classes:

- 1- Providing a complete education with increasing the accessibility to it in rural and sparsely populated areas
- 2- Continuity of educational services in small towns that are faced with shortage of students
- 3- Efficient use of limited resources
- 4- Improving the quality and effectiveness of education

1.4. Benefits of multi-grade classes:

- 1- Multi-grade education is an efficient and useful method to provide basic education in sparsely populated areas
- 2- This method has a high efficiency in applying limited educational resources such as trained teachers, educational space, etc.

3- Surveys and evidence indicate that this method gets students improved at math, foreign language, and science.

4- Girl students have more access to educational places and facilities in this method.

5- In this type of classes, students are taught how to learn and how to teach.

6- Teacher and student can develop a constructive and dynamic relationship and students can even help their teacher in evaluating and applying appropriate educational strategies.

7- Multi-grade education gives the opportunity to student varying in age to interact with each other (Nielsen HD.et.al (1993).

1.5. The causes of using multi-grade classes in Iran:

- 1- Adverse environmental conditions
- 2- Distant villages and specific geographical factors
- 3- Shortage of must-be-educated students in some villages and sparsely populated towns
- 4- Shortage of educational space
- 5- Shortage of manpower
- 6- Voluntary or forced migration of villagers to big cities

Hence, in order to cover all must-be-educated children and continue their education, establishment of education units with multi-grade classes, particularly in rural and sparsely populated regions is unavoidable.

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B) Teaching a single course to all grades in a session one after another: In this practice, all grades are taught a single course in a session one after another. For example, the teacher teaches to the students of grade 1 and assigns their tasks and then start teaching math to the students of grade 2 and so it continues.

Combination of axial and collective methods: This combination of the two previous methods.

It is noteworthy to say that all three methods flexible enough.

1.7. Problems, limitations, and disadvantages of multi-grade classes:

1- The intellectual and material attention and investment required to train teachers for these classes have not been spent and always the weakest and most inexperienced teachers have been appointed to these classes.

2- Non-specialist persons allow themselves to be involved in planning for these classes.

3- Some special problems of these classes are as follows:

A) On top of these problems is the lack of time, as there are 123 hours-courses in a 5-grade class that all of them should be covered in this short time.

B) Low experience and knowledge of teachers in this school on details.

C) In appropriate age composition of students (varying from 6 to 15 years old), while all are present in one class and are encouraged or punished in one way.

D) Family involvements of students

E) The presence of boy and girl students in one class

F) Lack of educational space and classrooms which is followed by some problems such as impossibility to divide the grades for teamwork independent teaching of teachers, impossibility to observe health issues, limitations in use of educational tools and edutainment.

G) Lack of a rich environment and lack of coordination between school and family education.

H) Outspoken critics of teachers due to poor living and educational conditions

I) Lack of basic educational equipment

Some of the limitations and peripheral problems of rural schools are as follows:

A) Some teachers don't live in the village they are teaching it and have to commute and sometimes are inevitably absent.

B) Closure on Thursdays

C) Heavy responsibilities of teachers in multi-grade classes

D) Disciplinary matters of learners in terms of emotional deficiencies, malnutrition, poor health, and other living conditions

E) Seasonal migration of some families to other regions

F) Dropout for reasons like migration, monetary factors, etc.

G) Lack of supervision and cooperation of families in educational issues of their children

H) Teachers' dissatisfaction because of tough conditions

I) Non-compliance with the programs and class discipline

J) Educational weakness and backwardness due to the problem in previous years

K) Lack of information of teachers on how manages and teaches in these classes.

1.8. A framework for curriculum reform:

1- Determining the curriculum

2- Reviewing the curriculum

3- Analyzing the minimum learning potentials

4- Identifying the relevant and shared skills and also direct and indirect teaching skills

5- Adapting the curriculum with local conditions

6- Providing appropriate educational tools and edutainment

7- Testing and implementing the adapted curriculum

1.9. Roles and responsibilities of teachers in multi-grade education and their general traits:

Teachers of multi-grade classes should be experienced and specialist and show a high level of some traits such as sacrifice, forgiveness, compassion and kindness, patience, diligence, competency, commitment, mastery of local language, having advanced skills in communication, efficient and effective management in the classroom, enthusiasm to work, and great perseverance.

1.10. The necessity of multi-grade classes:

Due to increased number of multi-grade classes and covering a significant number of elementary learners in such classes, continuous change and displacement of teachers, inability of parents to participate and cooperate in education, lack of time for teachers to plan, new approach of primary school textbooks and range of activities and also in order to cooperate with teachers in the process of teaching-learning, improve the education, prevent academic failure in multi-grade classes, increase the rate of progress, and strengthen the incentive of teachers to teach in these classes, the use of educational and edutainment software and CDs seems to be necessary. It is vital to provide the substrate for deepening in learning and academic promotion of students in rural and underserved regions through promoting and developing the culture of using computers and educational CDs and also dedicating to extracurricular activities.

1.11. The objectives of multi-grade classes:

1- Efforts to establish equal educational opportunities, especially in rural schools

2- The use of computers as an adjunct teacher

3- Optimal use of time in teaching the learners and saving the time of such classes

4- Enrichment of educational programs and activities and deepening the learning process

5- Accelerating the teachers and students access to large volumes of scientific and educational data, information, and materials in a limited time

6- Improving the education in multi-grade classes and preventing the academic failure

7- Making the educational environment attractive and providing educational facilities and tools commensurate with the progress of science and

knowledge in underserved and sparsely populated areas.

8- Increasing the knowledge retention of learners

1.12. Way of holding, reasons and necessities:

A multi-grade class, based on the number of grades and students, can be held in different ways. For example, a couple more than one blackboards can be used in classrooms so that students can focus better or student can be place in form of a "U". Placement and sorting of student depend on teaching style and teacher's enthusiasm to use different teaching methods and the following 2 reasons can be mentioned for its necessity:

1- Students reach cognitive and social development in these classes and also these classes reduce the anti-social behaviors of students.

2- Administratively, as the number of students in these grades is less, it is economically more affordable for the government.

Running multi-grade classes is more sensitive and difficult than single-grade classes, because teachers should deal with students varying in age and try to make the class fun for everyone. Teachers and students need to have a friendly relationship with each other and the teacher should believe in abilities of students and emphasize on their positive points and avoid punishment and other things such as befooling the students or threatening them by the leverage of mark. In order to teach different grades in a classroom, one of the grades should be considered as the center of teaching and assign tasks for other grades.

1.13. Disadvantages of multi-grade classes:

- 1- Shortage of time
- 2- Distraction of students
- 3- Students varying in age
- 4- Mismatch between textbooks and learning abilities of students in these classes
- 5- Shortage of trained and qualified teachers to manage such classes
- 6- Neglecting multi-grade education by teacher training centers and lack of training for teachers to deal with the problem of such classes

Along with all these disadvantages, the following benefits can be cited for multi-grade classes:

- 1- Cognitive, social, and emotional growth of students
- 2- Providing the substrate for learning some courses like math
- 3- Common teaching of some concepts
- 4- Reviewing the material for higher-grade students and providing the substrate fore lower-grade students to learn.

1.14. Your general comments about class management and interaction with students in multi-grade classes:

Class management may differ by different methods of teaching. Students are graded and their tasks are assigned. In some cases, the teacher should use individual teaching and testing. When the teacher assigns the tasks, student interacts with each other two by two and also with the teacher. For example, there is an interaction between the teacher and students when the teacher is asking them questions.

1.15. The arrangement of multi-grade classes:

Depending to the interests and tastes of teacher, teaching style, learning abilities of students, and other conditions, the arrangement of these classes may vary. However, the following two forms are more common. U-shaped method: This form helps the teacher to have a complete domination on classroom, especially the blind spots, so that all can easily have a eye contact with each other and with the teacher. In addition, the teacher can help the student who have auditory problems and get them involved in the process of teaching-learning by sitting them in the front rows and closer to the blackboard.

With paying a little attention to above-mentioned order, it can be found that this arrangement also has many advantages over conventional arrangements and is known as "triangular arrangement", provided that the number of rows is not much. If the number of learners is high, these rows are shortly repeated one after another and are pulled towards the back of classrooms (Nielsen, Dean. (1995).

2. Discussions

It can be concluded from the material discussed in this paper that given the circumstances in some regions like underserved areas, the use of multi-grade classes seems to be necessary. However, these classes have many problems, limitations, shortcomings, weaknesses, strengths, and benefits that the officials of education system should try to minimize weaknesses, limitations, and problems and reinforce the strengths.

Here are some of proposed solutions:

- 1- The need to strengthen teacher training centers and including a course titled "Multi-grade classes" in the curriculum of teachers.
- 2- The use of assistant and semi-professional teachers, from local community if possible, to help teachers.
- 3- The use of peer teachers. This means that student who has higher abilities can help the teacher to teaching other students.
- 4- The use of parents who can participate more effectively in the process of teaching. This can

develop a close relationship between community and school.

5- Providing special facilities and accommodations for these teachers and increasing their salary.

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