EDUCATION FOR ALL AND MULTIGRADE TEACHING: MAKING THE SCHOOL AN INTEGRATED PART OF THE INDIGENOUS WORLD

Dr. Pat Pridmore, Institute of Education, University of London,

20, Bedford Way,

London WC1H OAL,

UK.

ABSTRACT

The central argument in this paper is that for children in schools that serve impoverished, indigenous/minority ethnic populations to learn well, the traditional western model of schooling generally provided needs to be reformed. The aim is to deliver quality education at the margins and for these schools to become an integrated part of the student's world whilst still offering them new horizons, should they want them. Firstly, it uses a case study of teaching and learning in small, remote schools in the highlands of North Vietnam to identify challenges to the educational quality and reviews experiences from other countries to further illuminate the multidimensional nature of the challenges presented. Secondly, it reviews lessons learned from observation of multigrade teaching in successful small schools to identify opportunities to improve quality and relevance through improved classroom management and more situated learning. Thirdly it draws out the implications of the research findings for reform of teacher education and makes suggestions for adapting and expanding curricula so that all teachers are equipped the complete set of skills they need to guide culturally sensitive and relevant learning by managing student diversity through differentiation of learning tasks and outcomes.

Key words: multigrade teaching, indigenous pedagogy, curriculum

INTRODUCTION

Multi-grade teaching refers to a situation in which one teacher teaches students of two or more grade levels during one timetabled period usually, but not always, in the same classroom. There is strong evidence that high quality multigrade schooling can deliver levels of cognitive and non-cognitive achievement as high as or higher than monograde schooling of the same quality (Berry; Mason and Burns 1995; Veenman 1995) and (Pridmore and Vu 2006). In many developing countries Ministries of Education have located small, multi-grade schools close to where children live in remote areas where population density is low and there are not enough children being enrolled to have one teacher for each grade level. These schools now bring the only chance of education to millions of children around the world many of whom belong to indigenous/ethnic minority populations. For example, in 2005-6 in India 76% of all primary (grade 1-5) schools had 3 or less teachers; in 1998 in Peru 78% of all public primary schools were multigraded; and in 2001 in Burkino Faso 36% of primary schools and 20% of classes were multigraded (Little 2006b). It has recently been estimated that as many as 30% of children worldwide are enrolled in schools where there are fewer teachers than grades (even before high levels of teacher absenteeism are taken into account) and that this figure will rise to 50% when the children not yet enrolled are in school. These percentages translate into significant numbers of children, 242.45 million worldwide and 216.65 million in developing countries (Little 2008).

Small multigrade schools have enabled many governments to meet the commitment made at the World Education Forum in Dakar in 2002 and enshrined in the Education For All Goal (EFA) 2: "(To) Ensure that by 2015 all children, particularly girls, children in difficult circumstances and

those belonging to ethnic minorities, have access to and are able to complete primary education that is free, compulsory and of good quality" (UNESCO, 2002 p. 13). This goal was adopted as one of the Millennium Development Goals for education and, as we reach the half way point to the target date of 2015, progress towards this goal is currently being critically reviewed. Although the 2006 EFA Monitoring Report records an overall Net Enrolment Ration (NER) of 88% for all development countries, NER figures can be misleading. Children who enrol do not always attend and those who attend may be silently excluded because linguistic, cultural or health barriers mean that they are unable to participate and learn. Many excluded children belong to impoverished indigenous/minority ethnic populations who are hard to reach and experience low levels of school enrolment and high drop out rates due to the poor quality and lack of relevance of the education provided (see Little 2006a).

The central argument in this paper is that for children in these schools to learn well, the traditional Western model of schooling that is generally delivered needs to be reformed so that the schools can become an integrated part of the student's world whilst still offering them new horizons, should they want them. Such changes require a wholesale reform of teacher education to equip teachers with the culturally appropriate knowledge, positive attitudes and relevant pedagogic skills needed to deliver quality education to indigenous and minority ethnic children. There have been repeated calls for such reform (Miller 1991; Aikman and Pridmore 2001; Pridmore 2006; Mulryan-Kyne 2007).

This paper responds to these calls in two ways. Firstly, it uses a case study of teaching and learning in small multigrade schools in the highlands of North Vietnam to identify challenges to

teaching and learning and then reviews experiences from other countries to further illuminate the multidimensional nature of these challenges. Secondly it reviews lessons learned from multigrade teaching in successful small schools and describes three empirical models of multigrade classroom practice derived from classroom observation that are being used to increase student achievement and introduce more situated learning. Thirdly it draws out the implications for integrating indigenous pedagogy into multigrade teacher education. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the International Conference on Indigenous Pedagogies in Diverse Cultural Contexts: Issues, Challenges and opportunities held in Miri, Sarawak in November 2008.

The analysis presented draws on the literature, on personal experience and on the published findings from research studies carried out within an international programme of research on learning and teaching in multigrade settings that has been ongoing since 1998 at the Institute of Education in London. This programme has been directed by Professor Angela Little and myself working in partnership with researchers in Asia, South America and Europe (Little 2006). I have also worked on multigrade education with the World Bank in Africa and with UNICEF in Bhutan (Pridmore 2004). (See also: www.ioe.ac.uk/multigrade)

CHALLENGES TO EDUCATIONAL QUALITY AND RELEVANCE IN SMALL, REMOTE SCHOOLS

My engagement with multigrade schooling began in 1998 when my colleague Sheila Aikman and I were invited by the Ministry of Education (MOET) and Training and the British Council in Vietnam to spend two weeks visiting remote schools in the Northern Highlands to observe classroom practice, interview children, parents, teachers, teacher educators, health workers and educational officials and suggest ways to improve teaching and learning. Our experiences, described in Figure 1, give a snapshot of the challenges in some of these schools.

INSERT Figure 1: Challenges to multigrade teaching in remote areas of northern Vietnam

(Source: Adapted from Aikman and Pridmore 2001)

The Hmong children in these schools did not feel 'remote' because they are at the centre of their geographical world. The schools were nevertheless remote in terms of their marginalised position in relation to the national education system; their lack of appropriate resources and materials for ethnic minority children; the lack of ongoing professional support for teaching; the remoteness of the society in which the school is located from the national economy the wider society and national and international communication networks; and the teaching practices and curriculum being structured and conceptualised around the urban monograde school.

These schools suffered from inadequate funding, parental inability to pay for text books, decayed infrastructure and lack of facilities. The lack of communication observed in the remote classes was breathtaking. The Kinh teachers viewed Vietnamese as high status, the language of modernisation and access to wider bodies of knowledge and integration into national society and culture and the ethnic minority languages as a barrier to learning and to developing a sense of

Vietnamese identity. The ethnic minority children were experiencing language policies and curricula content and pedagogies which were insensitive to their backgrounds and worldview. For the learners and their families, school was viewed as an outside institution propagating values and practices emanating from a different historical and cultural trajectory.

Despite the stated aim of the government to renovate teaching and bring active learning into the classroom, initial teacher training did not aim to foster the development of teachers with inquiring minds ready to facilitate the same in their students. Trainee teachers were leaving college with no 'hands on' experience of self directed learning or collaborative group learning to use as a basis for their own teaching in either mono- or multigrade schools. As a result teachers ignored the multigrade context and taught one grade group at a time whilst the others sat idle. (We have called this model of classroom practice 'avoidance'.) Teachers were unable to find alternatives to teacher-centred teaching methods and passive learning even if they had observed more effective models being practiced in well resourced demonstration classrooms by master teachers and had attended short in-service courses on multigrade teaching.

A further constraint to bringing active learning methods into the classroom was that teachers did not know why they should use these methods. Their training did not explicitly acknowledge that child-centred and active pedagogy is embedded in constructivist theories of learning and an epistemology which requires a paradigm shift in the philosophical basis of knowledge. Teachers cannot be expected to innovate if they have only experienced the hierarchical, authoritarian tradition of teaching they encountered during their own schooling and at training college where the teacher or the text book is the source of unquestioned knowledge and the main aim is to

transmit this knowledge to the students. Teachers cannot be expected to act as facilitators who encourage children to become independent and active learners, value local knowledge and link learning to everyday life, without having experienced this approach to learning themselves. To be more effective teachers need opportunities, during pre-service and in-service teacher education, for guided trial and experimentation and support to develop confidence and skill in the new approach.

This case study is drawn from Vietnam, but the issues highlighted are common to many countries where multigrade schools for 'ethnic minority' or 'indigenous' children are poorly resourced in remote rural areas. I recorded similar barriers to learning in an earlier study I carried out in Botswana in a remote government, settlement school for Basarwa (Bushmen) children in the Kalahari desert where the traditional western model of schooling was being used as a vehicle to acculturate indigenous children so that they could be more easily assimilated into the mainstream. At the same time local non-governmental organisations were developing more indigenous models of schooling in which children gained knowledge and skills as they did at home and in the community - through myths, legends, games, songs and dances and by watching and doing. sacrificing their own cultural identity.(Pridmore 1995)

Within our international programme of multigrade research equally challenging learning environments have also been studied in 'remote' poorly resourced schools in the Amazon region of Peru (Ames 2006), Sri Lanka (Vitanapathirana 2006) and Nepal (Little and Pridmore 2006). In all these countries low teacher motivation and discriminatory attitudes towards the ability of ethnic minority children seriously reduced the quality of the teaching. Aikman and Pridmore have pointed out that low teacher morale is not surprising given the harsh conditions under

which many of them live and work. They summarise the views of teachers interviewed in the remote schools in Vietnam: 'For most teachers posted to these schools their teaching task is a burden, their students problematic learners, and the surrounding physical and socio-cultural environment an obstacle to be overcome' (2001 p.522). Discriminatory teacher attitudes towards indigenous children have also been highlighted by researchers in other countries: "If only 15 children can learn, then I have taught 15 only, no use sending rubbish to the higher class" (India) (Dyer et al, 2004, p.47); "They were generally lazy, unwilling to learn and lack support from their families. They show very weak memory retention" (Malaysia) (Mang, 2008, p.7).

The education of nomadic children brings additional challenges that require diverse and innovative models of schooling. For example, collaboration between the Ministry of Education and the non-governmental organisation OXFAM in Sudan has led young people who have secondary education being recruited from pastoralist families for a formal three month training on how to deliver the curriculum for the four years of basic education, elements of primary health care, first aid, animal health and adult literacy. These teachers are then given some text books, offered a 4 year contract with the government on a very low salary and on signing up they receive 40 sheep from OXFAM. They travel with the families in their community delivering the education and at the end of each of their contract the community gives them 10 sheep. Sheep are a strong incentive and by the end of their contract they are substantially better off. A critical analysis of this model of nomadic education by Aikman and Hanan (2006) acknowledges its ability to increase access but raises concerns over the quality of the education provided, the difficulty in recruiting and retaining girls and the sustainability of the model itself. These

concerns are also reflected in a synthesis of the education of nomadic peoples in East Africa other approaches to providing education for nomadic children by Carr-Hill et al.(2005).

To summarise: It is the through link between remote multigrade schools, disadvantage and ethnic minority/indigenous populations that the challenges combine to make teaching and learning such a remote and isolating experience. The studies reported above indicate that to teach effectively in multigrade classes teachers need appropriate training and support, well resourced classrooms, high motivation and positive attitudes towards multigrade teaching and their student's ability to learn. The reality in many poorly resourced, multigrade schools (and too often mirrored in teacher training colleges) is quite different.

OPPORTUNITIES TO ENHANCE QUALITY AND RELEVANCE THROUGH IMPROVED CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT AND MORE SITUATED LEARNING

Despite the many challenges identified above, it must be said that there are many small, successful multi-grade schools that not only increase access but also deliver quality education to remote relatively poor populations. From our international programme of multigrade research we have found that such schools use diverse models of classroom practice to increase student time on task and develop activities for students to learn in a variety of small groupings so that children of different ages, sexes and abilities are learning collaboratively and through same-age and cross-age peer tutoring to scaffold learning. These schools address language barriers and the teaching

of literacy through bilingual, multicultural models of education that recognise the literacy as a social practice implicated in power relations and embedded in specific cultural meanings and practices. They also build on the advantages of the school being located close to where families live to use the local human and physical environment as a rich resource for situated learning.

We have observed three empirical models of classroom practice that we have called quasi-monograde, differentiated curricula and learner and teacher centred. In the quasi-monograde model the teacher gives direct teaching to each grade group in turn and when it is not their turn students work unsupervised on an activity set by the teacher. This model can work well for classes with up to three grades (Mulryan-Kyne 2004). This model also includes multiple year curriculum cycles (also known as rolling programmes) where students in two or more consecutive grades work through common topics and activities together but start and finish the curriculum cycle at different times. These cycles can work well in all subjects, except for number work and reading, which need to be learned more incrementally and where each grade is therefore generally taught separately. In practice teachers often use a combination of the multiple year cycle and quasi-monograde models. The differentiated curricula model is a variation of quasi-monograde in which the same general topic/theme in the same subject is covered with all learners at the beginning and end of the lesson and in the middle of the lesson, students engage in differentiated learning tasks appropriate to their level of learning. In our research programme, experimental work has been done to develop, trial and evaluate the use of differentiated curricula for health topics in Vietnam (Pridmore and Vu 2006), for mathematics in Sri Lanka (Vitanapathirana 2006) and been found to be more effective than traditional monograde teaching

of the same quality. Differentiated curricula have also been developed for social science in Nepal (Little and Pridmore 2006) and for all curriculum subjects in Bhutan (Pridmore 2004).

In the learner and materials-centred model students work through interactive, self-study learning materials. The teacher may stimulate and check on learning, but students rely mostly on the materials. A well-known example of this model is the Escuela Nueva (New School) Programme, implemented in rural schools in Colombia for more than 30 years and now being used in some inner city slum areas in Bogota (Colbert, Chiappe et al. 1993). The Programme has been extensively evaluated and shown to be effective (Colbert, Chiappe et al. 1993). It has also proved flexible enough to be adapted and taken up in countries as varied as Brazil, Guatemala, Panama, Chile, Nicaragua, Guyana, Uganda and the Philippines, among others. Teachers are trained using the student learner guides and a teacher guide that explains how to hand over all non-teaching tasks (such as the social organization of the class) to the students and how to develop a model of democratic management (student parliament) within the school. The monograded curriculum for each subject has been developed as a series of graded modules, to deliver a differentiated curriculum to meet individual needs, and linked to a series of high quality, structured learner guides though which students work individually at their own pace. In this way a student can be working at different grade levels in different subjects at the same time according to their ability and attendance rate. This model has the great advantage of getting rid of grade repetition and students do not fall behind and risk dropping out when they need to take time out of school, for example, during the coffee picking season when they need to contribute to the family economy. In 2001 I observed students working in a rural Escuela Nueva School in Manizales, Colombia. The students did not work individually but in small groups of two or three

on the module activities so that they could collaborate in their learning and have increased opportunities for social and cognitive learning. The curriculum has been contextualised to include modules on topics of local interest such as coffee growing to link into everyday life and livelihoods. A crucial component of the learner guides is the built-in formative assessment to support learning. A student only moves on to the next guide when he or she has achieved mastery at the present level. In this way student learning progression can be managed more effectively, making greater use of student's readiness to learn and of their success in mastering what they learn as criteria for progression. The principle of flexibility also extends to promotion from primary to secondary school. Students do not all move on together at the end of the primary cycle; rather, they move on individually or in small groups when they have completed (and gained mastery in) all the modules in the primary curriculum

Within our multigrade research programme we have also explored the learning of language and literacy in indigenous schools. Ames (2006) carried out a detailed ethnographic study in the Peruvian Amazon and found that teachers trained in monograde pedagogies were struggling to implement the new constructivist approach introduced by the government to improve the quality of primary education by situating learning within the child's world.. She found that outside school children were used to playing, learning and working with adults and with children of different ages and that it was the multi-age character of the interaction that made learning possible. She found that literacy was central to the children's world for organising the household, communicating with others, expressing affection or getting information, organising community life through local organisations and securing a position and identity in society. She concluded that multigrade teachers might be more effective if they learned to view children's homes and

social backgrounds as a rich resource for learning rather than a barrier and paid more attention to local ways of learning and local ways to use literacy as a real social and communicative practice.

IMPLICATIONS FOR REFORM OF TEACHER EDUCATION

It is well-recognised that the teacher is the most important factor in student learning. This section will therefore consider how teachers can be better prepared for teaching in remote schools which serve indigenous/ethnic minority children. The aim is that these children and their families should no longer view the school as an outside institution propagating values and practices emanating from a different historical and cultural trajectory but rather as an integral part of the child's world which can still offer them new horizons should they want them. To achieve this aim teachers need to have the will and the skill to build bridges between their academic/book knowledge and the child's local/indigenous knowledge so that the child's learning can become truly transformatory.

This is no simple task because a major challenge for teacher education colleges seeking to introduce more indigenous pedagogies into remote multigrade schools in developing countries is difficulty in recruiting trainees from indigenous/minority ethnic populations and an almost total lack of indigenous teacher educators with experience of teaching and learning in such settings. There is an urgent need to increase recruitment efforts in this area and to find innovative ways to address this issue. Despite this challenge I would like to make two suggestions.

Firstly, there is a need to reform pre-service teacher education curricula to ensure that child learning is seen to be the main focus of schooling and to specifically challenge negative attitudes towards indigenous knowledge and the ability of indigenous/ethnic minority students to learn. Such reform requires teacher educators to make explicit the shift towards an interpretive paradigm and assist their students to understand that this shift profoundly influences how and what teachers should be teaching and how and what children should be learning. The new paradigm views knowledge as socially constructed and acknowledges and values local knowledge, culture, language and traditions alongside those of the dominant culture. It thereby opens up spaces for multiple perspectives and alternative epistemologies and requires teachers to understand and value the child's own world view. Teachers who accept this new paradigm and value local knowledge and culture are more likely to take advantage of small schools being located close to where the children live and use the local environment, including the student's themselves, as a rich resource of learning material and stimuli to enrich and situate learning. Teachers who accept the new paradigm and are given opportunities to develop skill and confidence in using a mixture of traditional and local/pedagogies to encourage child-centred, active learning, are more likely to transfer their training to the classroom and be able to build on the rich learning experiences that children have outside the school and create a friendly and more meaningful learning environment.

Such reform also requires teacher educators to foster positive attitudes themselves towards situated and active learning and to practice in their own teaching the enquiry-based, child-centred, participatory, learning approaches and critical pedagogies that they want their trainees to use in the school classrooms. Hickling-Hudson and Ahlquist (2003) point out it is particularly

important for teacher educators to assist teachers who are likely to be working with indigenous/ ethnically oppressed students to develop critical thinking skills together with the ability to encourage its development in their students so that they can master discourses of power. Teacher educators must sensitise their trainees to the need to actively seek out ways to indigenise the pedagogy, for example by putting an indigenous slant onto mainstream curriculum materials and introduce them to integrated pedagogical models of bilingual, multicultural education and methodologies for teaching the language of instruction as a second language. Of course, teacher educators also need to offer ongoing support when their trainees start to use these new approaches so that they can build the skill and confidence needed to build mastery and use them effectively.

Secondly I would like to suggest that the pre-service teacher education curriculum is expanded so that all teachers learn the few additional skills needed to be effective in a multigrade classroom and have at least a couple of weeks 'hand-on' teaching practice in a multigrade class. A strong argument can be made for preparing all teachers for multigrade classes and this is already being done in countries such as Finland where there are many multigrade classes. The argument rests on three points. Firstly, evidence from several studies that the areas in which a teacher of a monograde class needs to be skilful are very similar to those needed to teach effectively in a multigrade class (see Mulryan-Kyne 2007). Secondly, the fact that a high proportion of teachers are likely to need multigrade skills during their career given the persistence and prevalence of *de facto* multigrade classes in all countries. Thirdly, the fact that teachers trained for multigrade have the complete set of skills to be effective in both mono- or

multigrade classes and to manage student diversity through differentiation of learning tasks and outcomes.

All teachers need to have positive attitudes to teaching and learning in diverse cultural contexts, know how to plan and deliver a meaningful curriculum using child-centred and active learning pedagogies and how to use formative assessment as a tool to support learning. In addition to these general attitudes and skills there are four key areas in which teachers need additional training for multigrade classes (i) adapting the monograded National Curriculum to develop schemes of work and lesson plans for their multigrade classes (see Pridmore 2007) (ii) using multigrade models of classroom practice (as described earlier) to increase student time on task (iii) developing skill in facilitating student's self-directed learning and collaborative learning and (iv) building schemes of continuous assessment to support student learning. Mulryan (2007) argues that general pre-service teacher education programmes also need a heightened emphasis on the rationale for multigrade teaching, the selection and use of appropriate materials and resources, classroom layout, effective time management and discipline and parent and community relationships. To this list I would add the need for teachers in remote schools to receive some basic training in primary health care and first aid because it children in remote areas frequently carry a heavy burden of ill health that seriously reduces their cognitive development and school achievement (Aikman and Pridmore 2001; Pridmore 2008). In the absence of any health worker teachers are called upon to help and in countries such as Vietnam trainees in some rural provinces receive part of their pre-service teacher education together with rural health workers.

Although the above discussion has focused on pre-service training, the principles outlined also need to be reflected in all in-service training courses so that teachers already in the system can update their knowledge and skills. Experience has shown that in-service teacher education needs to pay special attention to establishing circles of support for teachers trying to innovate in remote schools.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have argued that it is possible to have quality education and learning in remote areas that serve impoverished indigenous/ethnic minority populations but that this requires more effective teacher education and support for pedagogic change together with systematic curriculum development. However, the findings from our international programme of research suggest, however, that a comprehensive package of inputs also needs to include enough good quality, flexible learning materials, strong management support for multigrade strategies and efforts to increase raise the status of indigenous multigrade schools. This package needs to be developed as a whole to promote synergy between the components and surrounded with national policies for each component that recognise, legitimate and support learners and teachers in multigrade settings. The package then needs to be promoted by policy reform champions who can overcome resistance and enable the right proposals to be put to the right people at the right time. Until such a package is in place the potential of indigenous models of multigrade education to transform ineffective educational systems for the better through building bridges between

different knowledge systems and ways of learning will remain underutilised and under-developed.

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FIGURE 1. Challenges to multigrade teaching in remote areas of northern Vietnam

(Source: Adapted from Aikman and Pridmore 2001)

We leave Hanoi and drive north for two days into Lai Chau Province to reach the case study centre school. From here we continue on foot, walking up-hill into the mountains for thirteen kilometres to reach the nearest of the sixteen satellite schools in the cluster.

The school is located in the centre of a Hmong village. It has one classroom and one blackboard. There are 11 students in the classroom in grades 1 and 2. The locally made benches are fixed to the floor and laid out in rows. There is no water or toilet facilities. The classroom is built of local materials and is open to the elements above waist height. The children live locally and are monolingual Hmong speakers. They receive text books and workbooks for maths and Vietnamese language through a UNICEF /Ministry of Education and Training project.

The National Curriculum is heavily prescribed and tightly controlled from the centre. Instruction is strongly teacher-led and content-based. Interaction between students is discouraged. The official language of instruction is Vietnamese. The Kinh teacher is a monolingual Vietnamese language speaker and has no Hmong or training to teach Vietnamese as a second language. He is a fully trained teacher but has no local knowledge, no materials, no teaching aids and no literate environment. He has had some in-service multigrade training but cannot apply it. He teaches one grade group at a time and the rest sit idle waiting for their turn with the teacher. He receives no visits from educational support staff, lives in a shack by the school and has no desire to stay as a teacher in this school.

His feelings are shared by the two Kinh teachers posted to another remote school in Son La Province but not by the Hmong teacher in this school who lives locally. This Hmong teacher has had a short training

but as an ‘under-standard’ teacher is only qualified to teach grade 1 students. He uses Vietnamese as the medium of instruction with some Hmong as auxiliary language. He has no bilingual training or materials and does not value his local knowledge. None of the teachers know how, or feel confident, to use the ‘15% window’ in the national curriculum for local content, which permits them to teach in the local language and focus on local history and traditions and crafts to make teaching more relevant to the children.

In a provincial college providing initial teacher training we observe a lesson on teaching art comprising a lecture from the teacher to 35 students sitting passively in rows facing the blackboard. The classroom walls are bare, the library has only a few government textbooks or space to read and there are no materials for students to make their own teaching aids.