

The Multigrade School Education Project: Distance Training of Teachers in Remote Rural Schools

Costas Tsolakidis C., Fokides M., Fokiali P., Sotiriou S., Orfanakis M.

Introduction

Multigrade schools are defined as schools where groups of students of different grades are taught in a single classroom. In these schools a relatively small number of teachers try to be effective, while dealing with different student groups at the same time. The multigrade class structure is known by various names in different countries; these include "composite" or "combination" classes, "split" classes, "mixed-age" classes and "vertically grouped" classes. Irrespective of the term applied, multigrade schools are considered to play an important role on providing access to education for all in remote, isolated and underdeveloped rural areas.

Moreover, this kind of schools is more than a reality in primary education in many regions of Europe and the rest of the world. In such areas, multigrade schools not only aim to give enrolment and continuous attendance in school environments, but also to provide knowledge and pedagogy of good standards. Furthermore, rural schools are considered to play an important role in social development. It is well established that the school not only facilitates the transmission of knowledge from teachers to learners but also acts as an institution of socialisation. The multigrade school offers the opportunity to its pupils to get the benefits of the school environment in cases where practically no alternatives are available. In many cases schools are the only state establishments in the area and, in addition to their use as educational centres, they should be seen as playing a societal role, as community centres that could foster local cultural and socio-economic development.

The multigrade school education in Europe

Multigrade schools are actually a more common situation than is generally admitted. They are a usual institution in European rural areas [1], [2], [3], [4]. Many countries in the Mediterranean, in Scandinavia and in central Europe, have significant rates of multigrade schools. For instance, In Finland, a country with many remote areas and islands, multigrade schools represent about 30% of the total school number. In Greece (2001-2002 school year data), 44% of primary schools are multigrade and 15% of teachers are working in multigrade schools.

The high number of multigrade schools in remote and isolated areas certainly is not coincidental. Geographic, social, economic and practical reasons make in many cases multigrade schools the only viable access to education for those who live in remote and isolated areas and have the right to get educated. In this sense, multigrade schools are vital in the European educational system, providing "solutions" that work in implementing important educational goals.

School enrolment in the European countries reaches very high levels; therefore the level of illiteracy is nearly zero. However the educational requirements certainly go beyond the standards of basic literacy. In Europe, high educational quality expected to be attained on every educational level. Any school, including multigrade ones, not only should provide education but also should offer quality education.

One of the peculiarities in the issue of multigrade schools is the big divergence between the importance attributed to them by policy makers and researchers in the field of education. The policy makers try to reduce their numbers in any achievable way, while researchers are debating on the educational value of multigrade teaching.

Little attention is paid to multigrade education in general. National policies most of the times ignore this part of the educational system or proceed to supported activities of limited extent with respect of time and resources. It should be realised that the role of multigrade education is vital for the rural community in its whole and should be targeted to provide quality education and foster social development.

Focus on multigrade teaching

The realisation of such a goal should focus in principle on the multigrade teacher and his ability to manage with his multiple roles in the multigrade school. They have to deal with classes difficult to handle. Consisting of pupils of diverse grades, age, learning abilities and interests, these classes require specific knowledge, teaching abilities, skills and experiences. Multigrade schoolteachers have to develop a wide variety of initiatives and teaching strategies [5], [6]. In their role of managing the school unit, they have to transform multigrade schools so that can provide an appropriate school environment for learners. This means that teachers in these schools should be able to manage resources, organise an attractive school life and communicate with other groups and individuals in the school community. Acting as promoters of multigrade schools' social role, the teachers have to realise the importance of the school in the community. Moreover they should be able to use school resources not only serving educational goals but also to plan open learning activities with the active participation of the local society. They should be able to create links, communicate efficiently with groups and individuals outside the school community and transform multigrade schools to centres of social development.

Unfortunately, usually this doesn't happen. Thus instead of the desired characteristics, in multigrade schools, teachers usually are young and inexperienced (mostly at the beginning of their professional career). Most of them are not professionally trained to face the multigrade teaching effectively. Finally, they do not have the opportunity to be trained in service. All these result in a frustrating situation that has negative impacts on the multigrade schools' efficiency.

The project MUSE

The project MUSE aims at the development of a new model of teacher's training that assists teaching in multigrade schools. The project is based on a close cooperation between pedagogical experts, policy makers and teachers in order to develop methods of fighting educational exclusion and school failure in rural areas and provides equal opportunities in education. The project is based on the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in multigrade school education and in the training of the staff working in multigrade schools. Further, the project encourages innovation in pedagogical methods and materials and promotes trans-national cooperation and communication between schools and teachers training establishments. The specific aims of the MUSE project seem to be exactly along with the aspects of multigrade education mentioned in the above paragraphs. In detail, these are:

- To develop an in-service specialised training programme for teachers in multigrade schools, aiming to meet the teachers' needs. ODL techniques.
- To enhance professional skills of multigrade schoolteachers and improve their abilities to develop plans according to the needs of the specific school environment.
- To develop a model that will allow for the continuous training and support of the multigrade schoolteachers.
- To provide training of multigrade schoolteachers on how they can act as promoters of the local community development.
- To conduct an intervention study in multigrade classrooms across Europe: The project will be implemented in multigrade school environments in Greece, Finland, Spain and United Kingdom.
- To make recommendations on multigrade teaching policy and practice. The project is designed to raise awareness of policy makers and planners on the size of the problems and needs of multigrade teaching and learning environment.
- To initiate the formation of a European network on the multigrade school education.

Within the framework of these targets, the MUSE programme focuses on some issues that are considered of vital importance for providing solutions to multigrade schools. These issues are (a) the integrated teachers' training programme, (b) the development of innovative multigrade teaching methodologies and strategies, (c) the extensive use of ICT, (d) the application of open and distance learning techniques (ODL) and (e) the transformation of multigrade schools into core nodes to the local community.

The MUSE project is a rather ambitious and extensive attempt to examine in a global way multigrade schools, which exist in many European regions, work under difficult conditions and form a neglected

or ignored part of the educational system. Apart from the promises for providing solutions in upgrading the quality of teaching in multigrade schools, the project considers as major challenges the attempt (a) to change the attitude towards these schools, (b) to show that these schools could become active centres of development in their region through the right policies and the appropriate use of modern technologies.

References

- [1] Tsolakidis C. G., 1999, "Distance Education in Remote Islands in the Aegean Sea", Online Educa Berlin, 5th International Conference on Technology Supported Learning, 24-26 November, Berlin, p. 147-149.
- [2] Tsolakidis C., 2001, "A Difficult School Network", On Line Educa Berlin, 7th International Conference on Technology Supported Learning and Training, Berlin, November, Book of Abstracts, p. 28-30.
- [3] Tsolakidis C., 2002, "Distance Education and Training in Primary Schools of the Aegean", International Conference on 'Information and Communication Technologies in Education', Research and Training Institute of East Aegean, Samos, 17 – 19 July, p. 299-307.
- [4] The persistence of the multigrade reality towards the close of the twentieth century, (1994) Multigrade teaching - A review of research and practice - Education Research Paper no. 12,
- [5] Vincent S and Ley J, (1999) Book 1: Review of Research on Multigrade Instruction, NW Regional Educational laboratory
- [6] Birch I and Lally M, (1999) Multigrade teaching in primary school, Centre for Research on Rural Education, The University of Western Australia, UNESCO Principal Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, Bangkok