

Multi-class Teaching: implications for teacher preparation

Govinda Ishwar Lingam

Introduction

Multi-Class teaching is a situation where a teacher is assigned to teach two or more classes in one classroom. Since schools organized in this way are common, not only in the Fiji educational context but also in other small Pacific states, it is useful to explore this matter further and investigate how it is catered for in teacher preparation. This paper provides an overview of multi-class teaching and its implications for teacher preparation in the Fiji context.

The Local Context

In Fiji, the scatteredness and isolation of communities resulting from the geographical distribution of the islands have implications for the provision and development of educational quality. In particular, this pattern of population distribution has certain implications for the provision of quality education to the indigenous children (Tavola 1991)

Primary Education

At present there are 715 primary schools with a total of 142,000 children. Broadly speaking, small primary schools are situated in rural areas serving communities with low population. Even in very remote settlements, the only formal institution to be found is a small primary school. From a general economy of scale perspective, small primary schools with low student population and with two to three teachers are not viable. In the Fiji context, however, the demand for education was the driving force behind the establishment of these small schools to serve the rural communities. Thus, the situation in Fiji clearly spells out that economy of scale alone should

not be considered in educational provision.

There are approximately 5000 primary school teachers within the national teaching service. Primary teacher training is carried out in three teacher training colleges. Lautoka Teachers' College (LTC) is administered by the government and provides the bulk of teachers needed in the primary schools. The other two teachers' colleges are run by the churches. Corpus Christi Teachers' College (CCTC) and Fulton College (FC) are owned and run by the Catholic Church and Seventh Day Adventist Church respectively. Together these colleges provide about 20 per cent of the nation's primary school teachers.

According to the Ministry of Education (in *Learning Together* 2000:162) a rural school is one that is:

- 10-20 km from a town boundary,
- equal to or greater than 20 km from a town boundary,
- very remote.

On the basis of the above criteria, there are about 560 rural schools and of these around 38 percent are in very remote locations (*Learning Together* 2000:162). The statistics for the early 1990s indicate that 50 per cent of all primary schools; 25 per cent of teachers and 28 per cent of the nation's children were involved in multi-class teaching (Collingwood 1991:12). The majority of indigenous Fijian children attend schools organized in this way (*Learning Together* 2000:83). Apart from multi-class teaching, rural teachers face an environment characterised by lack of support, poor quality educational resource materials and poor working conditions (Field 2001:44). Due to such characteristics, young graduate teachers are reluctant to take up teaching

appointments in rural schools, which could, therefore, be understaffed and this in turn adversely affects the teaching/learning process.

Multi-Class Teaching

In the local context there has not been any in-depth study conducted on multi-class teaching. However, a small-scale study on the theme was conducted collaboratively by a team comprising LTC and School of Humanities (SOH) staff of the University of the South Pacific (USP). The writer was then part of the LTC team. Other studies (for example, Lingam 1996) are also indirectly associated with the issue. It is worth presenting some of the findings of these studies.

The collaborative research by USP-LTC team was conducted on a sample of four selected rural schools (Singh 1996). Amongst other things, the teachers in the four study schools reported not receiving any professional preparation for multi-class teaching. The initial teacher education program that they completed failed to provide exposure and experience on multi-class teaching, and there has not been any regular in-service training conducted for these teachers in effectively handling multi-class teaching. It was also found that the UNESCO publication on multi-class teaching (*Multi-class teaching in primary schools: A handbook for teachers in the Pacific*), which was supposed to have reached all schools with composite classes some three years ago, has yet to reach them. The availability and the use of this publication would have helped the teachers in the study schools to address some of their concerns.

Lingam's (1996) study relating to teacher supply and demand for Fiji primary schools indicated that when individual schools with multi-class teaching are considered, the difficulties become apparent. For instance, one school had a total roll of 29 pupils with approved classes one to eight. On the

basis of Ministry of Education's staffing criteria, two teachers were provided to this school. Table 1 shows the number of children at each class level.

Table 1: Number of children per class

Class	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
No. pupils	7	5	2	5	4	0	4	2

Source: Lingam, 1996: 160

At first glance, the small number of children per class and the low teacher-pupil ratio may indicate a very favourable situation. In other words, children were receiving a high level of individual attention from the teachers and this could contribute to effective teaching and learning process. However, a closer look indicates that the situation is more complex. The best possible arrangement in the circumstance is for one teacher to handle four classes and for the other teacher to handle three classes. One can well imagine the difficulties faced by the teachers in this situation.

In a sense, the view that every class is a multiple class is true. Every class has children with a range of abilities, interests and needs, and teachers need to plan and conduct the teaching and learning process to ensure that they cater for all the children in their care. The range, however, is even wider when two or more classes are combined. In the school described above, one teacher's multi-grade class will have pupils with a four-year age range and with far more varying abilities and interests than in a one-grade class. Thus, the low teacher:pupil ratio in this school is not really an advantage because of the number of classes that are combined.

In another case highlighted in the study (Lingam 1996) a school had a multi-class comprising classes one and two with a total roll of 48 pupils. Such a situation is educationally unsound as, at the lower primary level when children are in their formative stage of development, they need a lot of care and attention.

In the local context, a question that naturally arises is, "How can a teacher handle two or more classes in one classroom when each class level has a prescribed syllabus to follow?" The fixed curriculum for each class level in Fiji makes it even more complicated for the teachers to cope with the demands of work in the multi-class context. For the teachers it is like playing two games of table tennis at the same time, and the workload for the teacher can become unmanageable. Furthermore, if one of the classes is appearing for an external examination then that class receives the most attention. The following response from a teacher handling a multi-class illustrates this:

Teaching a multi-class is not an easy job, particularly when Class 8 is to do an external examination. The class teacher has to see that all the requirements have been fulfilled before the students sit for the examination. When the teacher concentrates on Class 8 work, then Class 7 is neglected.

(Lingam, 1996: 165)

Because of the competitive examination system adopted by Fiji, even at the primary level, it is not surprising that teachers pay more attention to the examination class. The education of the children in the non-examination class may be adversely affected.

Besides administrative work, head teachers in small primary schools are expected to teach (Lingam 1996). This becomes very complicated for the headteachers. A head teacher handling a multi-class has this to say:

There are no helpers at all in the school. All the [administrative] work rests on the shoulders of the [headteacher] such as canteen and arranging labourers for grass cutting (in the school compound).

(Lingam 1996: 166)

The above comment suggests that when the head teacher attends to other duties, the classroom work may be affected and vice-versa. It is a pity that the Ministry of Education does not provide small schools with any ancillary staff.

These snapshots of the situation in a multi-class context provide some insights about the delivery of education in small primary schools located mostly in remote rural areas in Fiji. In the main, teachers have indicated that multi-class teaching is very complex and demanding. The qualitative aspects of classroom-related work may ultimately be affected.

The situation could be even more serious if a teacher is absent from school due to illness. Presently, there is no system of supply teachers. Some policies need to be put in place by the Ministry of Education to supply teachers to schools during a teacher's absence. In a game of soccer, extra players are kept on reserve in case of injury. Similarly, schools need extra teachers for any short-term exigency and this is particularly important in multi-class contexts.

Teacher Preparation

The previous section dealt with studies conducted locally. It is important to state that their overall conclusions are that teachers experience difficulties in handling multi-class teaching. This section will focus on one way of effectively dealing with the concerns of the teachers.

The multi-class situation is going to remain for the foreseeable future as part of the schooling structure in Fiji. As has been noted earlier, this is due to the scattered distribution of the population which has led to schools being widely dispersed and also small in size. In addition, the most recent report on education, the Fiji Islands Education Commission/Panel Report (*Learning Together* 2000:83) holds the view that "there is no realistic alternative to schools organised in this way" and, while the "obvious way to overcome this

would be to close down a large number of small schools and increase the number of primary age children at boarding schools ... would that be a humane or educationally sound decision?"

On humanitarian grounds it would be wise to keep children with their parents instead of enrolling them in boarding schools. At such a young age, children need parents' love and affection and if they go to boarding school, the children are going to miss these. Following this line of reasoning the small schools with multi-class teaching are almost certain to be retained.

One way round the concerns associated with multi-class teaching is to focus on teacher preparation at the pre-service level. That is, the professional preparation of teachers should meet the demands of work and related responsibilities in schools with multi-classes. There seems little sense in continuing to supply teachers who are not professionally prepared to effectively carry out the work in such schools. Concerns expressed by classroom teachers in Fiji are in line with the preliminary findings of a PhD research study (in progress) by the writer. It suggests that the pre-service program at LTC has, over the years, paid scant attention to multi-class teaching. The difficulties demonstrated by the teachers may be partly due to the failure of the pre-service program to professionally prepare them for this work.

While the focus so far has been on the difficulties associated with multi-class teaching, there are some aspects of it that can guide the way teacher trainees are prepared to teach. The Fiji Islands Education Commission/Panel (*Learning Together* 2000:83) commented that, in the local context, multi-class teaching:

... is more of a natural way of learning and teaching in that it is closer to how people learn in informal settings. It could be that multi-grade classes are a more culturally appropriate means

of teaching and learning for rural Fijian pupils than single-grade classes.

This point is worth considering for all teacher-training colleges. Thaman (2000:8) proposes that "prospective teachers in the Pacific need to be familiar with pedagogy based on Pacific values, beliefs, and knowledge systems that incorporate Pacific styles of learning and ways of knowing". In this regard the Tonga Teachers' College (TTC) has incorporated a compulsory unit on Tongan studies in its pre-service program to enable their prospective teachers to acquire the culturally appropriate pedagogy (Taufe'ulungaki 2000:24). Acquiring appropriate pedagogical skills will enable teachers posted to schools with multi-classes to take advantage of the opportunities available. Teachers will then have a range of options to effectively handle the demands of work with creativity and in professionally stimulating and satisfying ways. It is essential, therefore, for teachers' colleges to provide both theoretical and substantial preparation on multi-class teaching. Theoretical preparation could include areas such as:

- organizing the classroom,
- setting up routines,
- teaching with groups,
- peer teaching,
- creating stand-by activities,
- using outside help.

After laying a theoretical foundation, to give the trainees practical experience of multi-class teaching, at least one practicum should be spent in a school with multi-classes.

Conclusion

The literature on the subject derived from the local studies cited, reveals that primary school teachers in Fiji face difficulties in handling multi-class teaching. At the pre-service level some in-depth training is needed to equip

future teachers to cope with multi-class teaching. Such a training program could ensure that future teachers hold positive attitudes towards multi-class teaching. In addition, in-service training programs should also cater for multi-class teaching in order to improve the quality of basic education especially in rural settings.

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