A Critical Review on Multi-Grade Teaching in Cambodia

I. Introduction

This review paves the way to further understand on the issues of multi-grade teaching environment in Cambodia. This paper is just a part of a full report to be prepared for the Country’s presentation at the UNESCO Regional Workshop to be organized in 2015 – and then the full paper will be reviewed and be part of the full Regional study on MGT. Following this review, fieldwork research will be conducted to further understand the situations and challenges of the MGT in Cambodia. The central part of this review aims to outline the concept of multi-grade teaching, practices of other countries in the Region, and describe what has happened in Cambodia in terms of teacher training, school management and classroom arrangement for MGT.

I.A. Defining Multi-Grade Teaching

Multi-grade teaching (MGT) is a means to enhance access to education for all, regardless of sex, age, level of knowledge, socioeconomic status, and ethnic backgrounds. It is different from the mono-grade teaching by which a teacher in a classroom teaching more than one curriculum grades. Teachers are responsible, within a timetabled period, for instruction across two or more curriculum grades (Little, 2001:282). In some schools with few teachers and limited number of classrooms, teachers conduct classes combining two to three or four grades together especially at primary education level.

Multi-grade teaching occurs when a single teacher is responsible for a class formed of children from two or more grades. It is appropriate and even essential for many contexts in the world, particularly in remote, isolated schools with a limited number of pupils and teachers. This practice can help many countries to reach the Education for All (EFA) targets, Millennium Development Goals (MDG), national targets in regard to inclusive education for rural and remote children (Shaeffer, 2014).

I.B. Characteristics of Multi-Grade Teaching

MGT is generally built upon national policy on teaching force adjustment and to deal with the shortage of teachers and classrooms. According to Shaeffer (2014), the core principles of MGT are as follows:

- Teaching-learning methodologies are active, child-centered, participatory, cooperative, and self-paced with peer teaching across grade levels;

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• Curricular and materials are structured and theme-oriented;
• Environment – a whole-child focused classroom and the seating arrangement be adjusted to the number of students and size of the classroom;
• Class and classroom management are conducted informal and flexible in nature;
• It is strongly relevant to the local context and culture;
• Local community are actively involved and supporting the implementation;
• The teachers are facilitators, motivators, and community resource persons rather than playing a role of traditional teachers;
• A whole-child approach is beyond school attendance and achievement to concern for a student’s health and nutrition status, family history, and home environment;
• A whole school approach is beyond classroom teaching to better small-school management and stronger community participation.

I.C. Significance of Multi-Grade Teaching

MGT helps children, especially the most remote and isolated areas, realize their right to education of good quality. It is a good pedagogic approach to focus on child-centered, interactive, and collaborative learning environment across ages and grades. It further promotes cohesiveness and cooperation and strengthens interpersonal and leadership skills.

MGT is generally adapted to a range of cultural and school contexts. It is an economical solution in creating realistic pupil-teacher ratios and helping to balance a supply of teachers and dealing with teacher-deficit schools.

I.D. Regional Trends and Challenges in MGT

MGT has been implemented in other ASEAN members and due to frequent teacher absenteeism and shortage of teachers. For example in Thailand, over 14,000 primary schools have fewer than 100 students; in Indonesia, over 24,000 schools have fewer than 90 pupils and 5,000 schools have fewer than 50 pupils; and in Myanmar, around 70% of all classrooms are multi-grades because of a serious shortage of teachers (Shaeffer, 2014).

The challenges in the Region on MGT implementation are lacking of government-support policies and in some cases the schools were forced to close down or merge with the other neighboring schools in the same neighborhood. The schools implementing MGT are usually small schools less than 100 pupils located in remote or mountainous areas with students from poor and often ethnic minority families. Generally, those schools are managed with no follow-up actions from the local education offices or supervisors.

Nationally trained teachers are not willing to teach in rural and remote schools, especially in the areas that ethnic minority live. The teachers are generally not from the local community and not speaking the local language understanding the local culture.
With few incentives to stay and limited professional support, the nationally trained teachers tend to leave as soon as they can. The teachers recruited locally are less trained and not qualified for handling MGT classes. On the other hand, MGT methods are offered inconstantly across training institutions — and there is typically no practicum on MGT offered by the teacher training institutions.

The common issue in implementing the MGT is that the teachers, parents and the wider education system have little faith in MGT and considered it as providing low quality of teaching, but in many developed countries and international school systems, MGT is the first choice of classroom organization and teaching-learning approach (Shaeffer, 2014).

Students in the MGT classrooms are encouraged to build their individual responsibility for learning and managing their knowledge. Teachers play a role as facilitator and initiator of the pupil’s learning process and build their understanding on a particular themes (Hargreaves, 2001). What has happened in developed world, students in MGT are encouraged to involve in negotiating learning goals and achievements.

II. Policy Framework and Current Status on MGT in Cambodia

II.A. Guiding Framework

To enhance right-based education, especially the most remote and isolated areas, MGT helps children to realize their right to education of good quality. MGT focuses on child-centered, interactive, and collaborative learning, across ages, and grades. Multi-grade teaching refers to the teaching of students of different ages, grades and abilities in the same group. Due to shortage of teachers and inequality of numbers of students in primary schools in various provinces, the Royal Government of Cambodia issued a sub-decree on 24 October 1997 to determine roles, duties and monthly pay for multi-grade teachers.

Following the sub-decree, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) issued a guideline in 2000 determining on the pay scales for contractual teachers teaching in all multi-grade classes in the country. The guideline focuses on the followings:

- 60% of the total monthly pay for teachers teaching 2 grades as a plus on the normal mono-grade teaching.
- 80% of the total monthly pay for teachers teaching 3 grades.

In 2007, MoEYS issued multi-grade teaching guidelines for teacher trainers and handbooks for trainees in provincial teacher training centers and associate multi-grade teachers. Similar to practices of other countries, MGT class in Cambodia applies two or more grades of children in one class and only one teacher.
II.B. Schooling Situations

In Cambodia, 14% of the total number of primary schools is with the incomplete grades, offering grades 1-3 or grades 1-4. Due to shortage of teachers in remote and disadvantaged areas requiring teachers to teach multi-grade classes drawing concerns on quality of the delivery. MTG teaching in this context refers to teaching two to three classes in one classroom, generally combining grades 2-5 in the primary school level.

Currently, according to the MoEYS Department of Personnel in 2014, there are 2,548 primary schools offering 5,253 MGT classes. 2 grades are combined in academic year 2013-14 as common practice in Cambodia.

- Grades 1-2 (419 Schools)
- Grades 2-3 (414 Schools)
- Grades 3-4 (648 Schools)
- Grades 4-5 (373 Schools)
- Grades 5-6 (851 Schools)

In response, the MoEYS requires instructed those schools to provide multi-grade teaching due to the lack of number of classrooms and teachers. Small schools are 5-20 classes, financed annually by the budget from MoEYS amounting 9,000-12,000 Riels per pupil from urban to rural situation. The finance policy was also given 900,000-1,200,000 Riels per school for the annual running cost.

II.C. Teacher Training

MGT offered in all provinces in Cambodia, hence since 2007, a training module of roughly 28 hours on MGT in the teacher training program. Some in-service training for school teachers handling multi-grade classes also provided on need-basis.

MoEYS-EMIS indicates that 2,941 primary school teachers are multi-grade teachers teaching 2-3 grades. This comprises of 5% of the total primary school teachers (56,108). MoEYS, with the approval from the Prime Minister, is allowed to recruit 5,000 new teachers every year and of the total 5,000 new teachers, 2,200 to 2,500 teachers will be primary school teachers. These new teachers were trained on MGT even they did not have a chance to teach in a multi-grade classroom during their practicum.

III. Conclusion

In order to attain the EFA Goal 1 on universalized primary education, MGT has been put in practice in Cambodia with strong support from the Government. According to the Department of Personnel as of October 2014, there are 5,253 MGT classes in 2,548 schools in the whole country from all provinces. The policy support from technical and financial sides has given hope for over 200 incomplete primary schools. MG classes and
training of teachers to handle MGT remain in the key programs and activities cited in the Education Strategic Plan (MoEYS, 2014: 20).

MGT in Cambodia is perceived by policymakers as responding to the needs of having pupils in class as their basic right. MGT would not give high quality teaching due to pupils in primary level are dependent heavily on teachers. Self-learning and idea creation as the practices on MGT in developed countries are not yet exist in Cambodia even at the level beyond primary education. MGT is the only means to cope up with the issues of teacher shortages and the lack of classrooms.

REFERENCES


