

Synergies and Struggles: Investigating the Dynamics of Mixed-Grade Education in Rural India

Tharsni M., Angel Sharon & Shadab Khan

Abstract

In rural India, resource constraints in government schools often lead to the amalgamation of students from different grade levels into mixed-grade classrooms. This paper explores the dynamics of mixed-grade education in such contexts, identifying challenges and proposing interventions. Insights were gathered by conducting the semi-structured interview to know the challenges faced by the teachers in the heterogeneous classroom in Tamil Nadu. There were ten subjects who are English language Teachers, teaching the primary and secondary grades. The challenges include heterogeneous learning levels, curriculum adaptation difficulties, limited individual attention, and discipline issues that were pointed out by the subjects. To address these challenges, the paper suggests leveraging educational materials such as printed leveled reading materials, modular workbooks, visual aids, and flashcards. Interactive group activities with flexible grouping strategies and puppet shows are recommended to enhance engagement and facilitate interactive learning experiences. Moreover, incorporating local cultural resources into language lessons can enrich language education and establish connections between academic material and cultural contexts. By addressing these challenges and implementing interventions, mixed-grade classrooms can become more inclusive and effective learning environments.

Keywords: Heterogeneous classroom, low economic schools, materials, mixed grade classroom

Introduction

In the context of rural government schools in India, the challenges extend beyond mere resource constraints, encompassing critical issues such as a pronounced dearth of infrastructure and an insufficient teaching workforce. The consequential outcome of these challenges manifests in a rather unconventional but recurrent practice: the grouping of students from disparate grades into a single classroom. This amalgamation, where students from grades 1, 2, and 3, or 4 and 5 coexist within the same educational space, represents a pragmatic response to resource limitations.

However, this practice raises substantive concerns, particularly in the foundational stages of formal education. The absence of tailored, grade-specific attention to students hampers the recognition and cultivation of individual abilities. The risk of undetected potential looms large, as the pedagogical approach falls short of addressing the diverse learning needs inherent in mixed-grade classrooms. Furthermore, the challenge extends to the prescribed syllabus, which may not align seamlessly with the varied academic levels present in these amalgamated classrooms. The inability of teachers to adapt materials to suit the diverse learning requirements of students at different grade levels exacerbates this pedagogical dilemma.

In essence, the amalgamation of students in mixed-grade classrooms in resource-constrained rural government schools poses a multifaceted challenge. It necessitates a nuanced examination of the educational strategies employed, the adaptability of teaching materials, and the overall efficacy of the learning environment. Addressing these complexities is paramount to fostering an inclusive educational setting that not only acknowledges but nurtures the diverse abilities of students, ensuring a more equitable and effective learning experience.

Apart from that, according to Kapur (2019), there are many challenges in rural schools in India such as the quality of education, lack of infrastructure, lack of funding for field trips, and so on. However, this article delves into an examination of the potential challenges inherent in mixed-grade classrooms and offers a discourse on interventions aimed at mitigating these challenges. The complex interplay between curriculum constraints, teacher adaptability, and prescribed syllabi underscores the need for comprehensive exploration and targeted interventions to

enhance the efficacy of education delivery in such diverse educational settings.

Furthermore, there is not much research exploration focusing on the heterogeneous classrooms in rural India. This study will serve as a foundation for the understanding of the dynamics within such classrooms.

Literature Review: Heterogeneous Classroom

Heterogeneous grouping describes (a) learning environments where entire classes of students with different intellectual abilities are taught together in one classroom or (b) in groups within a classroom where students with different skill levels collaborate to learn together. This grouping technique is linked to initiatives to guarantee all students good academic levels and to give them access to advanced teaching techniques. Ability grouping has been a highly controversial approach (Ansalone, 2006; Rubin, 2006) as evidenced by the fact that it “has been the subject of more research studies (well over 500) than almost any other educational practice” (George & Alexander, 2003, p. 414). Ability grouping proponents, who include a large number of parents and educators, contend that when children are placed in ability-based groups, teachers are better able to tailor their instruction to each student’s requirements. Critics claim that goals for students in all tracks are too frequently unmet and that students are too frequently placed in groups that limit their ability tests are correlated with social status, money, and race; also, labelling children as belonging to “low” ability groups has stigmatizing effects (Gamoran & Weinstein, 1998; Mallery & Mallery, 1999; Oakes, 2005).

There is conflicting research evidence regarding the academic benefits of diverse groups. Studies such as Gutierrez and Slavin (1992), Anderson and Pavan (1993), and Miller (1989) supported the arrangement, but other studies [Brown & Martin, 1989; Eames, 1989; Johnson et al., 1985; Katz et al., 1990, etc.] found negligible academic improvements. According to Way (1981), those who are against multi-age grouping have typically voiced concerns about how achievement would be affected if students of various ages were placed in one. The findings of this investigation as well as earlier research suggest that such worries might not be justified. There does not seem to be any difference in achievement in single-age course and multi-age schools.

When we broaden our definition of success, we find that research is strongly in favor of the positive effects of diverse student groups because of the noticeable effects on attitudes towards learning, relationships with peers, anxiety reduction, and future aspirations. Pupils who were in an ungraded environment interacted with their teachers and other pupils more. Even preschoolers showed signs of greater interactions as a result of combining older and younger students. Older youngsters exhibited greater leadership qualities, prosocial actions rose, and student hostility decreased. Schrankler (1976) claim that there was an increase in school attendance rates. Pratt (1986) also asserts that the dropout rate is much lower in non-graded schools and notes that greater harmony and nurturing emerged within multi-age groupings.

Regretfully, there are others who disagree with the notion of assigning pupils to diverse groups. Teachers and parents of brilliant students have expressed fear that the benefits of having high achievers may be undermined. Schools are criticized by parents for not providing distinct enrichment sessions. It is noteworthy to notice that parents' complaints are typically directed towards the fact that their children are no longer treated differently and are not being singled out, rather than the curriculum itself. Another disadvantage for the teacher is the longer amount of time required for class preparation. Even though children get along better with people who are older and younger than them, they frequently find it hard to make friends who are the same sex or age because they do not have as many peers as they do.

Although teachers cannot reasonably say that children in multi-age classrooms would perform better academically, they may safely conclude that pupils will probably do no worse, according to the results of the studies presented here. To address varying rates of development and ensure that all students receive instruction that is appropriate for them, not simply those who happen to be on grade level, multi-age grouping might be a useful strategy. We need to make an even greater effort as the new millennium approaches to ensure that no pupil is left behind. Multi-age classrooms can assist in realizing this objective.

Challenges in Mixed-Grade English Classrooms: A Focused Examination

In light of the reviews conducted thus far, the conclusive impact of mixed-grade classrooms on student outcomes remains elusive. Within the Indian

educational landscape, instructing students within a heterogeneous class has evolved into a formidable challenge, owing to factors such as the rigidly prescribed syllabus and the teachers' limitations in tailoring materials to diverse learning needs.

In the semi-structured interview with the English language teachers of Tamil Nadu, it was found that there were a few indispensable challenges in the heterogeneous classroom. The subjects are ten English language teachers from Tamil Nadu across various districts. The interview was conducted over a phone call and transcribed later. The researcher observed a heterogeneous classroom for seven days in the Nilgiris district to witness the challenges faced by the teachers. Some of the important challenges found from the interview and observations are discussed below along with the excerpts.

Heterogeneous Learning Levels

Students in multi-grade classrooms often have varying levels of academic abilities, learning styles, and developmental stages. This makes it challenging for teachers to meet the individual needs of each student effectively. While some may grapple with basic grammar rules, alphabets, and vocabulary, others might be ready for advanced levels of framing sentences, phrases, and so on. So tailoring instruction to address this diversity becomes a juggling act, hindering the seamless progression of language skills for all students.

Curriculum Adaptation

Government schools often face constraints in terms of resources, including textbooks and teaching materials. One significant factor is the variability in academic abilities and learning styles among students within each grade level. Some students may grasp concepts quickly and require minimal support, while others may struggle with comprehension and need more time and assistance to fully understand the material. Table 1 provides an excerpt from the interview with a teacher.

Table 1: *Interview with a Teacher*

Excerpt 1
<p>Researcher: Are you following the timetable allotted in the classroom?</p> <p>Teacher: No ma'am. I do not follow the timetable or the syllabus completion properly because of various reasons. Since the class has students from 3 different grades, teaching them is difficult. I stopped at each phase of the lesson to ensure everyone understood it. This consumes a lot of time. Sometimes we may have to complete the syllabus on time because of the exams and internal tests.</p>

From the Excerpt 1, we can understand that, the teacher is finding it difficult to complete the syllabus on time because of the varied phases in which the learners learn. Moreover, the classroom environment itself may pose logistical challenges to effective teaching and learning. Overcrowded classrooms, inadequate facilities, and limited instructional time due to administrative constraints can all impede teachers' efforts to cover the curriculum comprehensively. In such environments, teachers may struggle to allocate sufficient time and attention to each student, leading to gaps in understanding and uneven academic progress across the class.

Limited Individual Attention

The government schools in rural areas are an overcrowded mixed-grade classes where a teacher endeavours to nurture language skills. Some students were having difficulty understanding at a slow pace, while others were progressing a bit more quickly. While teaching the class, the teacher finds it difficult to pay individual attention to every student in the classroom.

Table 2: *Classroom Observation*

Excerpt 2

(Teacher is teaching the lesson - Colours)

Teacher: This is Yellow - / 'jɛloʊ / . /j/ /ɛ/ /loʊ /

(Students repeat as the teacher says)

(The teacher noticed a couple of students from the 1st grade were not repeating back)

(Teacher calling out two students names X and Y)

Teacher: X and Y. நம்மமஞ்சள்சொல்றோம்ல. மஞ்சள்கலர்எங்க இருக்குநாமகிளாஸ்ல? காட்டுங்கபாக்கலாம்.

(Where is yellow in our classroom? Show it to us)

(student points out to the yellow poster in the classroom)

Teacher: Very good. English லமஞ்சள்என்றால் YELLOW. சரியா?

YELLOW- /j//ε//loʊ/. YELLOW- /j//ε//loʊ/. YELLOW- /j//ε//loʊ/.

இப்போது

நீங்கஇருவரும்எனக்குசொல்லிகாட்டமுடியுமா?

(It is Yellow in English, is that all right? Now, can you both tell me?)

Students: Yes miss. Yellow- /j//ε//loʊ/

Teacher: Very good!

Note. The translation of the Tamil sentences is provided in the brackets without being italicized. Other actions happening in the classroom are given in brackets with italics.

From the above excerpt, we can understand that, even though the teacher is giving individual attention to the students, it is difficult to do. The other students in the classroom were listening to the conversation, and few were talking among themselves. This actually made other students frown. Imagine if this happens 10 times in 45 minutes of instructional time. The time is wasted, the students will get bored, and it may even cause enmity among the students who are picking up slowly. Hence, providing individualized attention to each student for language refinement becomes a logistical challenge. Personalized feedback, essential for language development, becomes a luxury difficult to afford due to the diverse language proficiency levels within the class.

Discipline and Behavioural Issues

In an English language classroom blending students from different age groups, managing discipline requires a nuanced approach.

Table 3: *Classroom Observation*

Excerpt 3

Grade 3 Student: ஏய்! நீஃபஸ்ட்உன்ப்ளேஸ்லாஉட்காரு.

(Sit in your place first)

Grade 1 Student: நஉட்காரமாட்டேன். நீஏன்சொல்ற?

(I won't sit, why do you say?)

Grade 3 Student: நீஉன்ப்ளேஸ்லாஉட்கரவே, நஅடிப்பேன்!

(I will beat you if you are not sitting in the place)

Grade 1 Student: Miss! X அண்ணாஎன்னஅடிப்பேன்சொல்ராங்க.

(This brother is saying he will beat me, Miss)

Teacher: எல்லாரும்ஃபஸ்ட்உன்ப்ளேஸ்லாஉட்காரு.

This excerpt shows that younger students may struggle to conform to the behavioural expectations set by older grades, leading to disruptions. Balancing discipline in such a diverse age group demands strategic measures for a conducive learning environment. Failing to do so will create a disturbance in the classroom.

Possible Interventions

The choice and presentation of educational materials play a crucial role in addressing the challenges of mixed-grade classrooms in government schools. Well-designed and adaptable materials can help bridge the gaps in learning levels, engage students of varying abilities, and support teachers in delivering effective instruction. These examples demonstrate the diverse range of educational materials and tools available to support effective teaching and learning in mixed-grade government school classrooms. The key is to leverage resources that accommodate different learning levels, engage students, and foster a collaborative and inclusive learning environment. In low-economic contexts where technology may be limited, the role of educational materials becomes even more critical in supporting mixed-grade classrooms. Here are ways in which educational materials can play a vital role in a mixed-grade classroom setting:

Printed Levelled Reading Materials

Access to a variety of reading materials at different proficiency levels is pivotal for language development. Pratham, an NGO offers a different range of storybooks that can be downloaded freely. The teacher can bring the different levels of storybooks to the class and make the students read them and narrate it in the classroom. If not, local libraries, acting as valuable resources, can offer a diverse array of books. Whether it is a fourth-grader grappling with basic vocabulary or a sixth-grader ready for more complex narratives, the local library becomes a cornerstone in providing targeted reading materials for each student's proficiency level.

Modular Workbooks

To address varied language skills, teachers craft or customize modular

workbooks. Each workbook covers essential topics aligned with the curriculum for different grade levels. These workbooks include exercises, activities, and assessments tailored to cater to the diverse language proficiency within the class. Teachers, collaborating or using local printing services, ensure that students progress at their own pace, solidifying language skills effectively.

For example, the 'Ennum Ezhuthum' (Numbers and Letters) initiative of Tamil Nadu, has a workbook for the different levels of learners with the same text. Grade 1 has an Arumbu level workbook—which is very basic and the activities are picture identification, recognizing colour, and so on. Grade 2 has Mottu level workbook—which focuses on the words, writing them the words with proper spelling, Story reading, and so on. Grade 3 has Malar level workbook—that focuses on sentences, comprehension, and so on.

Such types of workbooks can be adopted by teachers from different states to cater to the student's level.

Visual Aids and Flashcards

Handmade visual aids and flashcards become indispensable tools for illustrating language concepts. Teachers who have access to locally available materials, and who are resourceful enough to create their own materials for the students create visuals to elucidate grammar rules, new vocabulary, and language structures.

Figure 1: *Visual Aids and Flashcards in the Classroom at Niligiri District*



These aids served as a point of reference for students with varying

learning preferences, fostering a comprehensive understanding of English language elements.

Interactive Group Activities with Flexible Grouping Strategies

Interactive group activities with flexible grouping strategies in a mixed-grade classroom include literature circles where students discuss books based on interest rather than grade level, jigsaw learning where students become experts on different subtopics and teach their peers, peer tutoring where older students assist younger ones based on subject strengths, project-based learning with heterogeneous groups working on relevant projects, Socratic seminars with small discussion groups tackling thought-provoking questions, and problem-solving challenges that encourage collaboration and critical thinking among students of varying grade levels.

Table 4: *Classroom Observation*

Excerpt 4

The students were grouped heterogeneously to do a reading comprehension activity. The grade 3 students have to read a story from the textbook of Tamil Nadu and teach the grade 2 and 1 students. After teaching the story, the students were supposed to ask questions regarding the story. The story given to one group was the 'Body parts'. Grade 3 students read the story and explained it to the grades 2 and 1. The teacher appears in front of the class and asks the students what they understand from the story. Grade 1 and 2 students were eagerly narrating the story to the teacher and other students. Suddenly the student from grade 1 asks:

Student 1: மிஸ், நமக்கு 'ஹார்ட்' இல்லையானாஎன்னஆகும்?
(What will happen if we don't have heart miss?)

Student 2: ஏன், மிஸ், நமக்கு 'முடி' இருக்கு? அன்னா, கொஞ்சம்
பேருக்குஇல்லை? (Why do some have hair and some not miss?)

(Teacher was so surprised with the questions)

Teacher: Very good! Super question! சரி, நாளைக்குஇந்த Question கு
answer

கண்டுபிடிச்சட்டுவந்துசொல்லு. யாருகரெக்ட் answer

சொல்றிங்களோ, அவங்களுக்குமிஸ்ஒருகிபிட்தருவேன். சரி ?
(Whoever finds the answer for this question, I will gift them something)

Students: All right miss!

While doing this activity, it was observed that the students irrespective

of their grades were engaged in the task. They were asking for the doubts and clarifications. There was a healthy noise in the classroom. This way the students took the autonomy of their own learning and helped each other in the learning process. It also promoted healthy competition between the groups.

The teacher can engage the students with story time sessions where students are grouped based on their reading levels, allowing each group to read books appropriate for their abilities or they can also be grouped based on the languages in the multilingual classroom. The teacher can give a prompt to the students. The students can discuss with their language group and narrate the story in front of the class which is culturally significant for them. For example, narrating their traditions, folklore, etc will engage the students at all levels in the classroom.

Puppet Shows (Teaching Story)

Puppet shows can significantly aid teachers in managing mixed-grade classrooms by enhancing engagement and facilitating interactive learning experiences. These shows captivate the attention of students of varying ages and abilities, making educational content more accessible and enjoyable.

Figure 2: *Puppet Show to Teach a Story in a Mixed Grade Classroom*



Through puppetry, teachers can effectively model concepts, behaviours, and social skills, catering to the diverse learning needs of their students. Additionally, puppet shows provide a platform for storytelling and

narrative-based learning, allowing teachers to contextualize academic content in an enjoyable and engaging manner. By encouraging active participation and expression, puppets can help foster a positive and inclusive classroom environment where all the students feel valued and supported in their learning journey.

Local Cultural Resources

Teachers incorporate local artifacts, stories, and traditions into language lessons. This approach not only makes language learning more relevant but also establishes connections between cultural contexts and academic material. The classroom transforms into a space where language education is enriched by the diverse cultural tapestry, fostering a deeper understanding of the English language in a real-world context.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study sheds light on the complex dynamics of mixed-grade education in rural India and offers insights into addressing the challenges inherent in such classrooms. By leveraging appropriate educational materials, implementing interactive group activities, and tapping into local cultural resources, teachers can create more inclusive and effective learning environments for students of varying ages and abilities. However, it is essential to recognize that addressing the multifaceted challenges of mixed-grade education requires a concerted effort from policymakers, educators, and communities. With targeted interventions and collaborative efforts, mixed-grade classrooms in rural India can become spaces where every student receives the support and opportunities they need to thrive academically and socially.

Limitations

While the proposed interventions and strategies have the potential to address challenges in mixed-grade classrooms in rural India, it is essential to acknowledge several limitations:

1. **Resource Constraints:** Many rural schools in India face significant resource limitations, including a lack of funding, materials, and technological infrastructure. Implementing some of the suggested interventions, such as printed levelled reading materials or interactive group activities, may be difficult due to resource constraints.

2. Teacher Training and Support: Effective implementation of interventions requires adequate teacher training and ongoing support. However, many teachers in rural areas may not have access to professional development opportunities or support systems to effectively integrate new strategies into their teaching practices.
3. Cultural Sensitivity: Incorporating local cultural resources into language lessons requires a nuanced understanding of cultural contexts and sensitivities. Without proper cultural competence training, teachers may inadvertently perpetuate stereotypes or misunderstandings, leading to unintended consequences.

Despite these limitations, addressing the challenges of mixed-grade classrooms in rural India requires a multifaceted approach that considers the unique context, resources, and needs of each school community. Collaborative efforts involving educators, policymakers, communities, and other stakeholders are essential to overcome these limitations and creating more inclusive and effective learning environments for all students.

References

- Anderson, R. H., & Pavan, B. N. (1993). *Nongradedness: Helping it to Happen*. Technomic Publishing Company, Inc.
- Ansalone, G. (2006). Perceptions of ability and equity in the US and Japan: Understanding the pervasiveness of tracking. *Radical Pedagogy*, 8(1). Retrieved on April 19 from https://radicalpedagogy.icaap.org/content/issue8_1/ansalone.html
- Brown, K. S., & Martin, A. G. (1989). Student achievement in multigrade and single grade classes. *Education Canada*, 29(2), 10-13.
- Eames, F. H. (1989). A study of the effectiveness of instruction in multi-age grading vs. traditional single-grade organization on the reading achievement of fourth graders. Western Connecticut State University.
- Gamoran, A., & Weinstein, M. (1998). Differentiation and opportunity in restructured schools. *American Journal of Education*, 106(3), 385-415.
- George, P. S., & Alexander, W. M. (2003). *The Exemplary Middle School* (3rd ed.). Thomson/Wadsworth.
- Gutierrez, R., & Slavin, R. E. (1992). Achievement effects of the nongraded elementary school: A best evidence synthesis. *Review of Educational Research*, 62(4), 333-376.
- Johnson, D. W., Johnson, R., Pierson, W. T., & Lyons, V. (1985). Controversy versus concurrence seeking in multi-grade and single-grade learning

- groups. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 22(9), 835-848.
- Kapur, R. (2019). The system of education in rural areas. *Acta Scientifica Agriculture*, 3(7), 79–86. <https://doi.org/10.31080/asag.2019.03.0520>.
- Katz, L., Evangelou, D., & Hartman, J. (1990). *The case for mixed-age grouping in early education*. National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Mallery, J., & Mallery, J. (1999). The American legacy of ability grouping: Tracking reconsidered. *Multicultural Education*, 7(1), 13–15.
- Miller, B. A. (1989). *The multigrade classroom: A resource handbook for small, rural Schools*. Eric. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED320719>
- Oakes, J. (2005). *Keeping track: How schools structure inequality*. Yale University Press.
- Pratt, D. (1986). On the merits of multiage classrooms. *Research in Rural Education*, 3(3), 111-115.
- Rubin, B. C. (2006). Tracking and detracking: Debates, evidence, and best practices for a heterogeneous world. *Theory into Practice*, 45(1), 4-14.
- Schrankler, W. J. (1976). Family groupings and the affective domain. *The Elementary School Journal*, 76(7), 432–439. <https://doi.org/10.1086/461007>.
- Way, J. W. (1981). Achievement and self-concept in multiage classrooms. *Educational Research Quarterly*, 6(2), 69-75.

Tharsni M. is a research scholar at the English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad. She works in the areas of multilingualism and material development. tharsniphdele22@efluniversity.ac.in

Angel Sharon is a research scholar at the English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad. Her areas of interest range from teacher identity to material design and development. angelphdele22@efluniversity.ac.in

Shadab Khan is a research scholar at the University of Hyderabad, Hyderabad. His area of interest is incorporating technology in English Language Teaching. ibnenasir28@gmail.com