

MULTIGRADED CLASSES IN TURKEY : IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF INSTRUCTION

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ÖZET:

Türkiye'de yaklaşık 24000 birleştirilmiş sınıf bulunmaktadır. Ne yazık ki, bu sınıflarda eğitimin niteliği oldukça düşüktür. Bu makalenin amacı birleştirilmiş sınıfların bazı özelliklerini ve sorunlarını belirlemek ve problemlerinin çözümüne yardımcı olmak için önerilerde bulunmaktadır.

ANAHTAR SÖZCÜKLER: Birleştirilmiş sınıf.

ABSTRACT:

There are approximately 24000 multigraded classes in Turkey. Unfortunately, the quality of education in these classes is low. The aim of this article is to determine some characteristics and problems of multigraded classes and to state some suggestions to help solve their problems.

KEY WORDS: Multigraded classes.

1. INTRODUCTION

In Turkey 40% of population lives in rural areas. The population and number of the houses are rather small in villages that are located separately from each other as small units. In these villages due to deficiencies such as the small number of the students, the insufficient number of available teachers and the impossibility of assigning a different teacher to each class, more than one grades were put together in a single classroom under the control of one teacher. [1]. Such classrooms in schools are called multigraded classrooms.

Depending on the number of classes and teachers in schools, multigraded classrooms can have with one, two, three or four teachers. According to the Ministry of National Education (MONE) statistics, there were 23964 schools with multigraded classrooms in 1995 - 96 school year in Turkey. While 13215 of these schools had one teacher for five grades together, 6844 of these had two teachers for five grades together. The total number of teachers in schools with multigraded classrooms was 35045 and that of students was 159085. These statistical data have shown that multigraded classrooms have a very important role in primary education in Turkey.

There is still a big migration from rural areas to urban areas. This migration has caused some schools to close down and necessitated the conversion of classrooms into multigraded classrooms. This has shown that multigraded classrooms will continue to be important for a long time.

Although there are lots of multigraded classrooms and the practice of multigraded classrooms has been going on for a long time in Turkey, studies on this subject are very limited. The aim of this article is to explain the characteristics of multigraded classrooms, to determine the problems of instruction and to make some suggestions to improve the quality of multigraded classrooms.

2. DIFFICULTIES FACED IN MULTIGRADED CLASSROOMS IN TURKEY

Instruction in multigraded classrooms is more difficult than independent classrooms because of its nature. Teachers have to deal with more than one classroom at a time so they have bigger responsibilities in preparing lesson plans, managing the classrooms and coping with the disciplinary problems. Besides, teachers can spare less time for students in this system. Moreover, specific characteristics of Turkey make instruction more difficult in multigraded classrooms and decrease the quality of education. Some of these difficulties are as follows:

2.1. Teacher Problem: In recent years the insufficient number of teachers has been a serious problem in Turkey. It is very difficult to find a teacher for multigraded students in rural areas because candidate teachers do not want to go to rural areas. MONE tries to close this gap with university graduates who do not have pedagogical formation. Many of these without any pedagogical background start their careers in multigraded classrooms. It is very difficult to expect those who do not have any knowledge on multigraded classrooms to be successful. Besides, continuity of education cannot be provided in multigraded classrooms. Most of the teachers who start teaching in these schools join the army or are appointed to schools in more developed areas in one or two years. Students always change teachers and

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sometimes they do not even have teachers for short or long periods in this system. This discontinuity in education makes the student unsuccessful.

2.2. Inadequacy of Instructional Material: Harmonious instructional material with the syllabus is needed to increase the quality of instruction in multigraded classrooms and to effectively use the hours without teachers. Students cannot find even course books in multigraded classrooms in our country. Though private sector prepares lots of printed teaching material for independent classrooms, there is none for multigraded classrooms.

2.3. Home Environment: Research has shown that home environment and family support affect learning in school a lot [2]. The income and education levels of the families who live in rural areas in Turkey are very low. For that reason, the level of readiness of the children for school in rural areas is also lower than that of the children in big cities. In particular, in South East and East Anatolia Region do not give enough importance to education and cannot guide and help their children academically. This negatively affects the students' academic success in school.

3. ADVANTAGES OF MULTIGRADED CLASSROOMS

Although there are lots of disadvantages of instruction in multigraded classrooms for students and teachers, there are some advantages as well. The most important are as follows:

3.1. Multigraded classrooms are economical because more than one grade are educated together in these classrooms.

3.2. It is a fact that students can transfer some knowledge and skills to each other much better than teachers can because the students' cognitive schema and their thinking processes are very similar to each other. Students in from different age groups and students who have different knowledge levels and skills are together in multigraded classrooms so they can learn new behaviors easily from each other.

If students from upper grades can be educated well, they can be good models with their behavior and study habits for students from lower grades. Besides, successful students from upper grades can be used as trainers for lower grades' students.

3.3. In multigrade classrooms, different level classes are educated together and subjects are repeated for different level students in the same classroom. These repetitions help students to learn much better and to make up for their deficiencies.

3.4. In multigrade classrooms, because there are

students of various levels, they can learn and progress according to their own pace. For example, less successful students in mathematics from third grade can take the course with second grade students while more successful students in mathematics from second grade can learn mathematics with the third grade students.

3.5. The hours without teachers are the most important part of the daily activities in multigrade classrooms. During these hours, students can find the opportunity to improve their intellectual skills such as self studying, self learning, self directing and doing research [3].

While educational environments are designed, the characteristics mentioned above should be considered and used for the benefit of the students to increase the quality of instruction in multigrade classrooms. If these circumstances are provided, better results can be obtained taken in multigraded classrooms than in independent classrooms.

4. SOME SUGGESTIONS TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF INSTRUCTION IN MULTIGRADED CLASSROOMS

The arrangement of educational environment in multigrade classrooms shows big differences as compared to independent classrooms. In multigrade classrooms some important principles should be considered in the stages of preparing daily lesson plans and application of the curriculum to increase students' success. Some of the principles can be summarized as follows:

4.1. Preparation of Daily Lesson Plans: There are no big differences between the curriculum of multigraded classrooms and independent classrooms in content. However, there are big differences in application.

In multigraded classrooms life science is core subject for the first, second and third grades, which is called "A group". In A group, life science program is common for the first three grades. For this reason, subjects are divided into three parts of almost equal difficulty level as first, second and third year programs. Thus, students study all subjects end of the third year.

Core subjects for fourth and fifth levels, which is called B group, are science and social studies in multigraded classrooms. A common program has been prepared for the last two grades and divided as first and second year programs. Other subjects such as mathematics and Turkish are different for each grade like in independent classrooms. When the programs are examined from these aspects, it can be seen that the program is both subject centered and

has broad field design. This structure provides teachers with more flexibility.

When teachers prepare lesson plans for multigraded classrooms, they should prepare a common plan for core subjects but different plans for other subjects for each level because required behavior varies from one level to another in other subjects, as the teacher deals with one level he/she should arrange other activities for other level students. In other words, teachers should carefully make plans for hours with a teacher and hours without a teacher and the time allotted to each level should be balanced. The desired quality is only obtained through good planning.

4.2. Establishing the Interaction Between Students: Effective interaction among students is very important in multigrade classrooms to increase students' success and to decrease the teachers' functions. The interaction between students can be best provided through group (team) studies.

Various groups can be formed in multigraded classrooms. Some of these are as follows:

a. Level Groups: These groups can be particularly used in teaching mathematics, Turkish, art and music. In level groups, students of the same success level are brought together in a group for each lesson. These groups can enable students to learn at their own pace with or without teacher.

b. Interest Groups: Students who have the same abilities and interests constitute interest groups. These groups help students develop their interests and abilities. Teachers can build interest groups to improve students' abilities and interest for different subject areas such as core subjects, mathematics and Turkish [3].

c. Heterogeneous Groups: These groups are established particularly in core subjects. In these groups, more successful students help less successful ones or students from upper grades help those from lower levels. Students from different grades and students from different achievement levels are brought together in heterogeneous groups. These groups help students to acquire new knowledge and skills through interaction with each other especially during the hours without a teacher.

4.3. Experiential Learning: Experiential learning is the most suitable learning strategy for primary school students. This principal plays a more important role in multigraded classes. Experiential learning is the most concrete way of learning. In this way, common experiences can be provided for students in different classes. Field trips, observation and dramatization are the main methods in experiential

learning. Teachers can use these methods easily in rural areas.

4.4. Teaching Students the Self-study Methods: In multigraded classrooms, in particularly Turkish and mathematics, while the teacher deals with one grade level students, others remain idle. These hours are called as hours without a teacher. Students are expected to study by themselves during these hours. Students should have self-study skills in order to benefit more from these hours. Gaining self study skills and habits requires time and maturity. For this reason these skills should be taught to students particularly during early school years. Besides, students should be thought how to use course books, use a dictionary and encyclopedias.

Primary school students are not good enough at some strategies such as recognising the important parts of a subject, taking notes and summarizing. These strategies usually develop after the sixth grade [4]. For that reason, teachers should clearly explain the activities at the beginning of the hours without a teacher.

Activities that can be handled by the students themselves should be chosen when hours without a teacher are planned. Research has shown that activities that are too easy or obvious may fail to gain or hold attention [5]. Attention is drawn to moderate complexity. For that reason, teachers must not assign students too easy or too difficult tasks to do in class.

4.5. Using Teaching Material: In the multigraded classrooms there must be lots of teaching material for students. This material must also be appropriate for the students' level. They provide students with an opportunity to study in their pace. Unfortunately, there is no such material available in our country. The educational environment can be enriched by providing various kinds of materials such as course books, encyclopedias, dictionaries, atlases etc.

4.6. Organizing the Classroom: Students are generally placed in rows according to their grades in multigraded classrooms. However, rows should be organized according to group design and there must be some corners to display the materials or to enable the students to reach them easily. Some possible corners are as follows:

A. Puppet Corner: Experiential learning is very important in multigraded classrooms. Presentation of the information through drama makes it concrete so all the students can actively participate in the learning process. For this reason, a puppet corner should be organized in each multigraded class.

B. Unit Corner: In the primary school cur-

riculum, unit is one of the most important parts of the core subject. For that reason, there is a unit corner in almost every primary school class. Most of the teachers use a flannel board for displaying unit subjects. A separate table or desk can be placed near the flannel board to put printed and other teaching material on multigraded classes. This organization helps the students to study by themselves.

C. Study Corner: In multigraded classes a study corner can also be organized for the hours without a teacher. If the school has a spare class, it can be organized as a study class for the students. This organization can increase the productivity of the teacher during the lesson and other students who attend the hours without a teacher can study effectively.

4.7. Using Educational Games in Teaching:

Games play a very important role in children's lives. Students can express themselves, learn to obey rules and improve their communication skills through games. Primary school students enjoy group games and competition [6] and research has shown that educational games increase the academic achievement of students [7].

In order to effectively use the hours without a teacher, educational games should be taught to students. Besides, competitions can be encouraged among groups to motivate the students.

5. CONCLUSION

Multigraded classrooms are very common in Turkey. It is expected that these classes will continued in Turkey's social structure. For that reason, some measures should be taken to increase the quality of instruction in multigraded classes.

Teacher problem of the multigraded classes should be solved, first. With teachers who do not have a pedagogical background and without providing continuity of education, it is very difficult to improve the quality of instruction. For that reason, the MONE should appoint experienced teachers with pedagogical background to these schools and encourage them to stay in these schools. In addition,

initial teacher training institutions should provide teacher students with knowledge and skills on multigraded classrooms.

Another factor that affects the quality of the instruction in multigraded classes is teaching material. These classes need lots of specific teaching material. In recent years, there are some new projects to improve multigraded classes in Turkey such as "Improving Multigraded Classes Project" carried out by the cooperation of UNICEF and MONE and "Basic Education Pilot Project" carried out by the cooperation of MONE and the World Bank. These projects contribute to the improvement of the materials for multigraded classes.

In Turkey, such projects should be supported to improve the equality of educational opportunity and to prevent the rate of drop outs in the multigraded classes. More research should be done on multigraded classrooms.

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