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Professional Growth Pathways for Primary School Teachers in Multi-grade Environment: Challenges and Solutions

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Abstract

The main objective of the current research was to investigate the professional development of teachers in public schools who teach in classes with several grade levels. Professional development is a crucial aspect of effective multi-grade teaching. Multi-grade teaching is believed to have a substantial influence on both instruction and learning. A descriptive research method was used for the study. The study population consisted of 200 government school instructors, from which a sample of 496 teachers was randomly chosen using simple random sampling. The selection was made from public schools in the Ziarat area of Balochistan, Pakistan. The data were subjected to analysis using factor analysis, ANOVA, and chi-square test. The research findings suggest that instructors with expertise and pedagogical abilities achieve higher levels of teaching and learning outcomes in multi-grade classes. The study suggested that the administration should arrange training programs to augment the pedagogical knowledge and proficiency of instructors in schools.

Keywords: Multi-grade Teaching, Professional Growth, Multi-Grade, Primary Level

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Title

Professional Growth Pathways for Primary School Teachers in Multi-grade Environment: Challenges and Solutions

Abstract

The main objective of the current research was to investigate the professional development of teachers in public schools who teach in classes with several grade levels. Professional development is a crucial aspect of effective multi-grade teaching. Multi-grade teaching is believed to have a substantial influence on both instruction and learning. A descriptive research method was used for the study. The study population consisted of 200 government school instructors, from which a sample of 496 teachers was randomly chosen using simple random sampling. The selection was made from public schools in the Ziarat area of Balochistan, Pakistan. The data were subjected to analysis using factor analysis, ANOVA, and chi-square test. The research findings suggest that instructors with expertise and pedagogical abilities achieve higher levels of teaching and learning outcomes in multi-grade classes. The study suggested that the administration should arrange training programs to augment the pedagogical knowledge and proficiency of instructors in schools.

Keywords: [Multi-grade Teaching](#), [Professional Growth](#), [Multi-Grade](#), [Primary Level](#)

Introduction

The demands of the 21st century, including individual expectations, multinational student tests, globalization, and rapid access to knowledge and new technology, have necessitated changes in teacher competencies and the duties expected of them. Professional development is crucial for teachers to keep up with evolving demands and gain new information, abilities, and attitudes (Ekinici & Acar, 2019).

Many countries have achieved substantial advancements in their efforts to achieve the Millennium Development Goal of Universal Primary Education by establishing multi-grade schools in villages and isolated regions. The latest Sustainable Development Goal for teaching and learning explicitly states the importance of Quality Education (Table, 2017). Multi-grade instruction is considered the situation in which teachers are required to instruct pupils in multiple grades simultaneously within the same classroom. Classes that

encompass numerous grades, such as Grades 3, 4, 5, and 6, can be referred to by several terminologies such as different-age, different-grade, composite, combination, family, split-level, stage, different class, and multi-year (Ramathan & Mzimela, 2016 p. 2). This study focuses on a multi-grade class. The major duty of the multi-grade instructor is to educate pupils by providing knowledge, rather than simply adhering to a curriculum. A teacher must possess the ability to nurture abilities and imbue students with positive attitudes and ideals. Irrespective of the individual differences that may exist among the students, it should make sure that each student in the classroom experiences an engaging and effective learning experience, the educator must be adaptable and implement a variety of strategies (Ballesteros & Ocampo, 2016).

Several nations have been striving to accomplish the 2nd Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of “Education for All”, often known as ‘Universal Primary Education’, by creating multi-grade schools in rural and isolated regions characterized by small and impoverished communities. A teaching principal is responsible for both teaching a full load of classes and fulfilling the duties of a principal (du Plessis, 2014). The educational system in Pakistan is severely flawed. Since achieving independence, there have been limited significant alterations to the general educational system, with primary education being particularly noteworthy.

Multi-grade teaching is when two or more grades are taught in the same classroom setting (Hyry-Beihammer & Hascher, 2015). Multi-grade teaching classes are frequently combined for two reasons: first, to prepare students to teach in smaller educational settings with fewer instructors by grade level, and second, to deal with unpredictable enrollment in bigger metropolitan or semi-urban institutions. In integrated classrooms, one instructor is frequently responsible for teaching at the same time various grade levels (Shareefa, 2021).

Multi-grade instruction is prevalent in public sector schools, particularly in distant and rural regions of Pakistan. Multigrade schools are mainly found in rural locations when enrollment numbers do not support hiring one teacher for each grade level (Mulryan-Kyne, 2007). Multigrade teaching requires differentiating class material and activities for children of different ages and class levels, which can be difficult (Quail, et al. 2014). Primary schools in Pakistan’s rural areas offer multigrade classroom instruction. In such cases, pupils from two or three grade levels are grouped

together, and a single instructor oversees the entire classroom. Children are continuously taught key reading and numeracy skills throughout their primary education, which stops when they enter secondary school. Primary school in Pakistan is attended by students in grades one through five. According to Jamaldini et al. (2022), primary schools exist in some rural areas of Pakistan and provide classroom instruction to pupils of various grade levels. In Pakistan, multi-grade teaching is implemented because of necessity. Hence, the researcher aimed to investigate the teachers’ professional growth in adopting multi-grade teaching at the primary level in the Ziarat district, located in the province of Balochistan. The multi-grade education in District Ziarat is situated at the convergence of educational accessibility, efficient allocation of resources, and active involvement of the community. District Ziarat, similar to several rural and neglected areas, encounters distinctive obstacles in delivering high-quality education. The research issue of multi-grade teaching is highly significant as it directly tackles these challenges.

Multi-grade teaching is widespread across the world. Students from two or more consecutive grades are often seated in the shared classroom or premises and get instruction mostly by a single instructor, or in certain cases by many teachers. The pragmatic strategy of multi-grade teaching can substantially help District Ziarat, which is characterized by remote and resource-constrained schools. When there is a lack of teachers or restricted infrastructure, combining different grade levels into one classroom helps efficiently allocate resources, maximizing the utilization of available facilities and personnel. To summarize, studying multi-grade education in District Ziarat is important not only because it can help overcome resource limitations and provide educational opportunities, but also because it plays a crucial role in enhancing teachers’ professional knowledge and skills. It serves as a pragmatic answer to the distinct obstacles encountered by teachers in schools.

Literature Review

Multi-grade teachers in Turkey, Africa, and the Netherlands face a variety of obstacles, such as transportation difficulties, dealing with an uneducated parent, disadvantaged economic circumstances, overwhelming teacher workload, time limitations, language issues, and various challenges in the teaching and learning process (Engin, 2018). Barriers to effective education include that there is no parental

involvement in their children's education, inappropriate rules of funding, lack of resources, untrained teachers, and teachers responsible for multiple grades (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). Teaching the English language in multi-grade classes in Turkey is tough due to teachers having minimum expertise in the topic (Dogan, Çapan, & Cigerci, 2020). Consequently, the academic achievement of kids in multi-grade classes also declines (Checchi, & De Pala, 2018).

Gerhart, as cited in Tatković et al. (2018), defines professional development in two ways. In a broad sense, it encompasses the entire duration of a teacher's career, from when they enter the educational process until they retire or leave the profession. In a narrow sense, it refers to specific periods during which a person follows significant growth and development. It is well-known that some teachers go through extended periods without any progress in their professional activities. Therefore, it is important to distinguish between years of service and experience, as well as between quantity and quality of development.

The efficacy of ongoing professional development programs may mostly be ascribed to instructors' intrinsic drive to participate in professional learning (Zhang et al., 2021). Sancar et al. (2021) argue that teachers' professional development (PD) plays a vital role in enhancing student results. Defining professional development is a complex task due to its multidimensional nature and the fact that it evolves during a teacher's career. Existing research has been unable to provide a meaningful definition for professional development. Efficient professional growth perceived evaluation and assessment, research volume, time duration, context, comprehensiveness, 'dissemination, support and control, and collaboration. The school principal is responsible for enhancing teachers' understanding and implementation of multi-grade teaching by increasing their knowledge, facilitating comprehension, and providing support in the classroom. The community, school board, and parents must consistently support the school's requests for staff and resources. Furthermore, teacher institutes must require pre-service teachers' preparation in the subject of multi-grade teaching course design and implementation. Continuous professional development for in-service instructors is mandatory for the ongoing improvement of multi-grade teaching (Buaraphan et al., 2018).

Multi-grade educators employed several effective strategies to enhance their students' abilities and skills, enabling them to be competitive at larger educational

institutions. The pedagogical techniques employed by instructors teaching multiple grade levels promptly yielded numerous commendable results. Therefore, the use of tactics that ignite students' interests by multi-grade teachers can significantly improve the process of learning (Naparan, & Alinsug, 2021). According to Grossman and Richert (1988, p. 54 as cited in Table, 2017), teacher knowledge refers to a comprehensive set of professional adept that is an understanding of broad pedagogical principles and skills, as well as knowledge of the specific topic of the subject that is taught. The above-mentioned definition fails to consider the "practical knowledge" that is shaped by the various situations instructors encounter and is derived from the application of other forms of knowledge.

The categories of an effective professional development model are as follows: identifying a need, setting goals, planning, implementing the development process, and evaluating the outcomes. These categories form a self-contained cycle. Ekinçi and Acar (2019) determined that support and monitoring activities are necessary to achieve cooperation between the primary categories and teachers. Teacher professional development is commonly understood through a social constructivist lens, acknowledging that teachers, as learners, build their understanding in social contexts as they encounter new ideas that challenge their existing beliefs, attitudes, and knowledge. Social constructivists assert that the social environment in which learning transpires is inseparable from the individual's learning process (Skyhar, 2020).

Research Methodology

The main objective of the current study was to investigate the professional growth of teachers in multi-grade classrooms. This examination utilized a quantitative research approach, specifically focusing on descriptive analysis. The study focused on government schools in two tehsils of the Ziarat district in Balochistan as the research population. The research population consisted of two hundred school instructors from the Ziarat district. The study sample comprised 256 female teachers from Ziarat girl school in tehsil Ziarat, and 120 female teachers from tehsil Sanjawi, making a total of 376 female teachers. Additionally, there were 80 male teachers from tehsil Ziarat and 40 male teachers from tehsil Sanjawi, making a total of 120 male teachers from district Ziarat. The participants in this study were instructors from multi-grade schools who have been implementing

classroom tactics in their contexts. The researcher sought to identify a reliable pattern of experiences and hence recruited research participants who had prior experience teaching multi-grade courses. Furthermore, each study participant attended a primary school located in a rural location. All of the research participants were from rural primary schools. The study sample was selected using a basic random selection method. The primary tool utilized in this study is the questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of close-ended questions that gathered data on the classroom strategies, concerns and challenges, professional knowledge, and skills of the multi-grade teachers. A survey was conducted using a Likert scale questionnaire, which included close-ended 'questions with response 'options ranging from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree" and "Undecided".

To assess the validity of the research instrument used in the study, the researcher sought assistance from specialists to determine the strengths and weaknesses of the questionnaire and make improvements to the tool. The researchers obtained authorization from the school administrators to

conduct the study. The study's prospective participants were informed and requested to provide their consent to participate. The researchers adhered to the requisite ethical rules when gathering the data. To collect data, the researchers contacted the respective heads of the multi-grade instructors to seek permission from them regarding the current research. Following the meeting with the school administrators, the researchers proceeded to engage in preliminary discussions with the intended participants. The researchers adhered to the ethical norms required for obtaining the quantitative data during the data-gathering process. The researchers showed a high level of respect towards the individuals. The researchers upheld 'the participants' anonymity and ensured the privacy of the given information.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed' through descriptive statistics 'Mean score, standard deviation, and inferential statistics through Chi-square test, Cross Tab, and ANOVA. Researchers conducted all the analyses with the help of SPSS ('Statistical Package for Social Sciences').

Table 1

Gender wise analysis

Gender	Frequency	Percent
Male	120	24.2
Female	376	75.8
Total	496	100 %

The table displays the gender distribution of 496 individuals. Females constitute 75.8% (376) of the total, while males

account for 24.2% (120). Overall, female teachers respond to our questionnaire more than male teachers.

Table 2

Teacher's Training program-wise analysis

Resource Availability	Frequency	Percent
Yes	220	44.4
No	276	55.6
Total	496	100.0%

This table explains the distribution of Government teachers of Ziarat, Baluchistan who attend teacher training programs during their service or not. We can say 276 teachers never attend any training program while 220 teachers attend the teacher's training

program for better learning and understanding. The ratio of teachers not attending the program is more than the number of attendants.

Table 3

Cross Tabulation for Training Programs According to Teaching Experience

	Training Program attended		Total
	Yes	No	

		Training Program attended		Total
Teaching Experience	3-5 years	92	72	164
	6-10 years	75	136	211
	10-15 years	38	63	101
	46-20 years	15	5	20
Total		220	276	496

The above contingency table shows the frequency distribution of two categorical variables that the training program to be attendant concerning their teaching experience in years.

Table 4

Chi-Square Test Results

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	25.262 ^a	3	.000
Likelihood Ratio	25.484	3	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	2.238	1	.135
No of Valid Cases	496		

The above table revealed the chi-square test of association between the training program to be attendant and the teaching experience shows a significant result and indicates there is a significant association between ‘these two variables’ as the p-value is less than 0.05 ($p < 0.05$).

Table 5

Descriptive Analysis of current teaching knowledge and skill

No.	Statement	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	I group the students and organize class routines to help the student learn better	4.75	0.861
2	I make sure the topics covered fit together well, so students in different grades can work on similar things	5.69	0.745
3	I change teaching methods according to the needs of the students, so each student can succeed in their way.	7.84	0.771
4	I promote students’ independence habits for their work in the classroom.	7.92	0.892
5	I teach in different ways so that each student understands the material.	8.00	0.908
6	The best use of time enhances better learning.	7.71	0.782
7	I help students learn how to do things on their own. So, we can work together smoothly.	7.71	0.852
8	I encourage self-directed learning among my students.	4.17	0.957
9	I address the socialization needs of pupils in addition to their academic development.	9.54	1.036
10	I provide individualization support for pupils when needed.	4.55	0.851

The above table shows the descriptive statistics of current teaching knowledge and skills from 496 respondents of Government teachers belonging to Ziarat, Balochistan. We can observe that encouraging self-directed learning among students has the lowest mean 4.17 with a standard deviation of 0.957, while two factors “best use of time” and “help students to learn and do their own has the same mean of 7.71 with 0.782 and 0.852 standard deviation respectively. The one

factor that has a maximum variation of 1.036 is “I address the socialization for the students for their economic development” with a mean 9.54 among all factors.

Table 6

Descriptive Analysis of Challenges and Issues in Multi-Grade Classroom

No.	Statement	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	Time management is a challenge in multi-grade classrooms.	6.29	0.832
2	There is a lack of incentives associated with multi-grade classrooms	8.36	1.882
3	I feel a sense of psychological disconnection from my school environment, which is also a challenge in a multi-grade classroom.	4.38	0.581
4	I have experienced the vacant post's increased workload.	4.93	0.834
5	Lack of teacher accountability impacts my work and effectiveness of teaching.	3.09	1.370
6	I have encountered challenges in implementing various strategies in multi-grade classroom settings.	4.67	0.865
7	Motivating students in multi-grade classrooms can be challenging.	2.22	0.969
8	I have experienced training to adapt to evolving educational needs.	3.09	1.376

The above table shows the descriptive analysis of the challenges and issues we face in a multi-grade classroom, we observe that the factor “lack of incentives associated with multi-grade classrooms” has a greater mean of 8.36 and also the maximum variation of 1.882 among all other factors. There is another factor that has the same mean of 3.09 and a

standard deviation of 1.376 is “we should adapt to evolving educational needs and “Lack of teacher accountability”. There is only one factor that shows the minimum variation “motivating students in the multi-grade classroom can be challenging” with 2.22 mean.

Table 7

Descriptive Analysis of Solution for the Improvement and Support of Multi-Grade Classroom

No.	Statement	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	It is necessary to increase the physical opportunities of the schools with multi-grade classes.	7.56	0.497
2	Remove the disadvantageous learning conditions for the students who are in multi-grade classes.	4.16	1.007
3	The teacher should be provided with the chance to observe and practice in multi-grade classes in their pre-service period.	5.70	0.682
4	The examples of multi-grade classes from other countries should be shared with teachers.	8.08	0.762
5	Schools with multi-grade classes should have at least two teachers.	5.25	0.433

The above table illustrates the descriptive analysis of the improvements and support in multi-grade classrooms, we observe that the 1st suggestion in this regard is to increase the physical opportunities for students has a mean of 7.56 with a

standard deviation of 0.497. The 2nd suggestion in this regard is to remove the disadvantageous learning of multi-grade classrooms has a mean of 4.16 with a standard deviation of 1.007. “There should be a chance for a teacher on their pre-

service period to observe” is the 3rd suggestion which has a mean of 5.70 with a variation of 0.682. The 4th suggestion is to “illustrate the examples of other countries and their method of the multi-grade classroom to us” with has mean of 8.08

which is the maximum among all suggestions with a variation of 0.762. The last suggestion “there must be at least two teachers in the multi-grade classroom have a mean of 5.25 with a standard deviation of 0.433.

Table 8

ANOVA table of current teaching knowledge and skill

Factors		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Different ways to teach	Between Groups	44.699	3	14.900	20.178	.000
	Within Groups	363.293	492	.738		
	Total	407.992	495			
Best use of time	Between Groups	10.341	3	3.447	5.803	.001
	Within Groups	292.270	492	.594		
	Total	302.611	495			
Learn to do their own	Between Groups	15.861	3	5.287	7.580	.000
	Within Groups	343.163	492	.697		
	Total	359.024	495			
Self-direct learning	Between Groups	34.085	3	11.362	13.341	.000
	Within Groups	419.004	492	.852		
	Total	453.089	495			
Address socialization	Between Groups	7.662	3	2.554	2.400	.067
	Within Groups	523.610	492	1.064		
	Total	531.272	495			
Individual support	Between Groups	3.250	3	1.083	1.499	.214
	Within Groups	355.490	492	.723		
	Total	358.740	495			

The ANOVA tables evaluate current teaching knowledge and skills: The F-value indicates whether there is a significant difference among the group means. While the p-value shows the probability of obtaining those results. The ANOVA test shows significant results because the p-value is less than 0.05 which indicates there is a significant difference between at least two group means for all the factors except “I address the socialization needs of pupils for their academic development” and the factor “I provided individual support to pupils” which indicates there is no difference between them.

Discussions

The main goals of this research were to assess the influence of multi-grade teaching on the professional growth of teachers with 'multi-grade classrooms' in primary education. To examine the difficulties and concerns encountered by teachers when teaching many grades simultaneously. Secondly, the objective was to measure the impact of

demographic characteristics, such as gender and participation in teacher training programs, on teachers' professional development.

It focuses on the process of selecting and establishing new positions in schools that have many grade levels. Teaching in multi-grade classrooms necessitates instructors to simultaneously teach many grade levels, hence demanding that teachers in such circumstances be provided with additional incentives to remain engaged. The result aligns with Khan's (2016) research, which specifically examined the impact of bonuses or increased salaries on individuals in mono-grade classes. The frustrations of instructors will be alleviated, and they will experience renewed enthusiasm and passion for teaching multi-grade courses. One finding of the current study indicates that teachers in single-teacher schools encounter significant responsibilities and challenges in managing all aspects of the school alone.

Similarly, the study aligns with the findings of Mulaudzi (2016) that the only method to ensure that multi-grade classrooms receive sufficient instruction is by increasing the number of teachers in multi-grade schools. Based on the research, educators hold the belief that children enrolled in single-grade classes outperform pupils enrolled in multi-grade classes. However, the recruitment of teachers will not only alleviate the workload of teachers but also enhance the effectiveness of students' learning. The study revealed that multi-grade teachers have challenges in terms of curriculum coverage, excessive workload, classroom control, student achievement, and insufficient assistance. Similarly, Ekinci and Acar (2019) also highlighted that it is necessary to establish assistance and support teachers to manage their extra work and to promote teaching activities in multi-grade environments.

Conclusion

The objective of the current research was to understand the perspectives of 'primary school teachers in District Ziarat regarding the process of teaching and learning in a multi-grade environment. The study's findings indicate that teachers expressed that a multi-grade environment can positively influence students' acquisition of knowledge in areas such as group and peer learning, continuous pre-learning and revision, as well as the enhanced development of social skills and independence. Nevertheless, it was widely agreed upon that the multi-grade environment presents specific difficulties from a pedagogical perspective. These problems encompassed high levels of planning or time management, completion of paperwork or curriculum, and the absence of specialized training or help from the industry. The absence of targeted instruction in this particular teaching methodology might greatly influence a teacher's effectiveness in facilitating student learning. The research not only identifies the issues that must be resolved in multi-grade teaching and learning, but it also enhances our understanding of the difficulties, achievements, possibilities, and demands experienced by both teachers and students in multi-grade

environments. Comprehending the reasons why educators engage in professional development can enhance its effectiveness. Teachers should prioritize the recognition of the necessity for professional growth above everything else. Factors such as a reputable profession, specialized expertise, adaptability to change, and the ability to cater to the requirements of parents and pupils may contribute to this aspiration.

Recommendations from the Study

- Teachers should adopt new techniques to increase the involvement of students in multi-grade classrooms.
- Encourage teachers to learn teaching strategies to be flexible and adaptable to multi-grade contexts.
- Provide teachers with additional training and resources to optimize student engagement in multi-grade classrooms. Students in different grades can work on similar things together in multi-grade classrooms very well.
- Continue to invest in pre-service training that facilitates individualized instruction to meet diverse student needs.
- Offer professional development opportunities to increase teachers' confidence in fostering a sense of belonging in multi-grade classrooms.
- Empower teachers to leverage the enhanced flexibility of teaching techniques in multi-grade classrooms.
- Offer targeted training programs too. help educators develop new teaching skills needed for effective 'multi-grade' teaching.
- There should be at least two teachers in multi-grade classrooms in case of a single-teacher school.
- Suggestions for further research
- This study is based on district Ziarat. For further study, it is suggested to take two or more districts or provinces.
- This study is only based on primary government school teachers; it can further suggest to elementary or secondary school teachers.

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