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Inclusive Instruction: Multi-Grade Teaching in Ghana's Rural Context

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ABSTRACT

With barely half a decade remaining to achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) targets outlined in the 2030 Agenda, and as part of the promise to equitable, inclusive, and quality education for all (SDG 4), the effective and efficient practices of multi-grade teaching are captured. In the context of case study fieldwork at a government rural basic school in Ghana, teachers were interviewed to better understand their practices of multi-grade teaching during this 21st-century global advocacy for quality teaching and learning in education. The interviews reveal interesting perspectives about the nature of the practice of multi-grade teaching and whether it could fit the “progressive” description of Ghana’s basic education, and the UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4.

INTRODUCTION

In 2015, world leaders agreed to 17 Global Goals (Sustainable Development Goals or SDGs). As part of that they promised equitable, inclusive, and quality education for all. However, the quality of education requires more action, especially in primary school. This SDG targets 4.C. commits substantially increasing the supply of qualified teachers because “teachers are a fundamental condition for guaranteeing quality education.” The UN recommends a pupil-teacher ratio of only 40:1 at the primary school level. However, in Ghana, there is a severe shortage of teachers, especially trained teachers. There is a pupil (trained) teacher ratio of 62:1 at primary school, but it is marginally better when counting all teachers (i.e., trained and untrained) at 43:1 (Ghana Factsheet, 2020). This has given rise to multi-grade teaching where the primary school teacher needs an interdisciplinary perspective to provide learning environments for students with different personalities and prior knowledge (Kartal & Demir, 2023). Therefore, all over the world, children of different ages and grades are educated together. Far from being backward, these systems may have much to teach us (Little, 2006). Multi-grade classrooms which are common in areas where there are many students but few teachers (Çıkrık, 2017) are a “nightmare” for teachers because they have to design the class to appeal to every grade level in the classroom (Blease & Condy, 2014). However, multi-grade settings are viewed by many as second best or old-fashioned. However, with their emphasis on the learner, learning how to learn, and developing social and cognitive skills, others view multigrade education as progressive and good quality (Little, 2006). For millions of learners worldwide it is not a matter of choice between multigrade and monograde. For them, the choice is between a multigrade class or no class at all. These settings call for multigrade

pedagogies that work. In this study, I explore the substance of teachers’ experiences concerning multigrade teaching in Wuruduwurudu, a government rural basic school in Ghana. My analysis indicates the extent to which education pervades international conventions in a context where equitable, inclusive, and quality education for all is limited and education is more about teacher availability than individual rights and freedom for total development.

Multi-grade teaching holds both benefits and shortcomings (Bajpai & Panday, 2023; Engin, 2018; 2014; Little, 2006; Miller, 1991). This study is interested in conceptualizing equitable, inclusive, and quality education for all in Ghana, particularly in terms of how teachers talk about multi-grade teaching. In the end, I want to speculate on the extent to which their experiences reflect outcomes of what Little (2006) describes as the “progressive” of the UN SDG 4 and to consider its paradoxes.

Contextualizing Multi-Grade Teaching within Ghana Education

With barely six years remaining to achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the 2024 SDGs report warns that current progress falls far short of what is required to meet the targets outlined in the 2030 Agenda (United Nations, 2024). In Africa, development policy and management over the past decade have been greatly influenced by the SDGs and Agenda 2063 with significant strides to embed them within national policy frameworks while re-organizing institutional structures to deliver on both Agendas. Africa still lags in achieving the SDGs with the current Africa Sustainable Development Report revealing that Africa is unlikely to achieve the SDGs and Agenda 2063 without scaled-up concessional development, climate financing and transformative domestic reforms. It is critical now more than ever to

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accelerate action to achieve the SDGs.

Since Ghana's independence, its successive governments have recognized the indispensable role which education plays in the country's socio-economic development. Accordingly, some measures have been and continue to be taken to expand education at all levels. The evolution of education in Ghana since its beginnings in the nineteenth century has involved all levels of education from preschool, primary, middle (now junior high), secondary, and teacher training to tertiary. Ghana's education policy (Inclusive Education) draws on several national and international commitments to the provision of education for all. At the national level, it confirms government pronouncements in the 1992 Constitution to ensure that every Ghanaian is afforded equitable opportunity in terms of access to quality education (FCUBE), the Accelerated Development Plan of 1951, the Education Act of 1961, and the Ghana Government's Education Strategic Plan 2010-20 (MOE, 2013; Ekundayo, 2018).

It further draws on other national legal documents including the Ghana Shared Growth and Development Agenda (GSGDA), the Disability Act, and the Education Act. It is also based on the international commitments to education to which Ghana is a signatory, including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990); the World Declaration on Education for All - Jomtien (1990); the Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 1993); the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action (UNESCO, 1994); the Millennium Development Goals (2000); The Dakar Framework for Action (2000); and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) (MOE, 2013).

The overarching goal of Ghana's education policy (Inclusive Education) is to redefine and recast the delivery and management of educational services to respond to the diverse needs of all learners within the framework of the Universal Design for Learning and Child-Friendly School Concept.

For the purposes of the policy, professional development is defined as covering teacher training (both pre-service and in-service), continuous professional development for teachers as well as orientation, modular courses for other educational personnel (head teachers, school support staff), and related administrators at district and regional levels.

In pursuance of professional development under the policy

- Teachers shall be equipped with the pedagogical skills, and adequate knowledge of educational policies to meet the needs of children with special educational needs using child-centred approaches.
- The curriculum for pre-service training shall be re-aligned to Inclusive Education Practices (Adoption of the Collaborative Co-operative Training Model).
- The cadre of IE experts shall be enhanced through an increase in the intake at the Colleges of Education.

- The content of In-Service training shall be strengthened to address the methodology for inclusion.

- All teachers shall be trained in making their class environment more friendly, how to be role models in their dealings with the diversity in their classrooms, and how to ensure their students are non-discriminatory, open, supportive of each other, and respectful of each other.

- Teaching Practice / Internship shall focus on IE practices and ideals.

- All trainees shall experience teaching using a methodology that promotes the inclusion of all learners.

- Teachers shall be trained in initial assessment to identify learning difficulties among children and refer for further diagnosis.

- All other school personnel and relevant administrators at district, regional and national levels shall be oriented in IE approaches and behaviours.

- All communities and parents shall be oriented to support and be mutually supportive in their nurturing of children with special needs.

- All districts shall provide space for the establishment of resource and assessment Centres for professional development.

Although this policy was very laudable, many of the strategies articulated in national plans have fallen far short in achieving their objectives due to limited resources (MOE, 2013). Efforts by the government to bring about equity and quality in education remain priorities for government spending (MOE, 2018), to address gross inequities that marginalise rural children, and in particular that hinder access to education in inaccessible and remote areas (Juvane, 2007). Teacher provision remains the biggest obstacle that confronts developing countries in their effort to achieve quality universal primary education. Along with the prevailing teachers' gap, a shortage of classrooms and other educational facilities has led to overcrowded classrooms and high pupil-to-teacher ratios, which have affected the quality of education delivered, particularly in rural and poor areas.

Ghana as a developing country has socio-demographic characteristics typical of many poor deprived communities in sub-Saharan Africa. For example, it is an area with low socio-economic activity, high levels of poverty and scattered community settlements, all of which contribute to undermining access to conventional school systems. These characteristics have also, in the past, undermined government commitment to rapid expansion of primary education because of inadequate supply of trained teachers hence, the introduction of multigrade schooling to increase access (Akyeampong, 2006). In most developing countries, multigrade classes arise out of necessity rather than choice. Multigrade teaching is often the only type of education to which learners have access due to the shortage of teachers and school facilities especially in rural, hard-to-reach areas with small or high school enrolments. They are more common than are often recognised in national and international policy,

in teacher education curricula, in curricula or assessment studies of curricula (Juvane, 2007).

The educational spaces of rural multigrade schools in Ghana are characterized by a lack of pedagogical and technological resources, areas of difficult access, improvised training of teachers in new school methodologies, adoption of a pedagogical model, and the absence of in-service training to meet the challenging dynamics in rural schools. An example of these multigrade rural spaces in Ghana is the government rural basic school in Wuruduwurudu.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This is an ethnographic narrative on the rural public basic school called Wuruduwurudu (Akan/Akuapem Twi for 'Brook flow'). The study aims to understand the practice of multi-grade teaching in such schools during this 21st century when global advocacy for quality teaching and learning in education are confounded in Ghana by the issues of high teacher attrition rate, poor teacher-student ratio, and limited rural infrastructural growth. This paper aims to analyze teacher and headteacher talk on multi-grade teaching. In this section, I describe the school site, methods, participants, and limitations.

Study Site

Wuruduwurudu is located in a rural district outside Accra, Ghana. Though the exact year of the school could not be provided by the headteacher and School Management Committee (SMC) members, it is believed to have served the rural dwellers for almost or a bit more than one hundred years. The school was selected for study because its headteacher(s) and staff are cherished educators who reflect positive, goodhearted, patriotic and hardworking teaching at a rural school; has high teacher deficiency and so assumes a poor teacher-student ratio; and because the researcher had easy access to it.

The school plant is an eleven-unit classroom with a headteacher's office and a staff common room which couples as an ICT laboratory. Five of the eleven classrooms (floor tiled) were built by Empower Play-ground Incorporations- a non-governmental organization (NGO) linked with the Latter-Day Saints Church. Other provisions from this NGO include teaching and learning resources (ICT tools, Science study kits), play materials for kindergarten (merry-go-round), rechargeable study lamps, a borehole, sanitary towels for adolescent school girls, and a biodigester lavatory.

Out of the nine teachers at the school, three (headteacher inclusive) share the nine junior high school (JHS) subjects; and teach from JHS 1 to 3. The remaining teachers share and teach (class teachers) from kindergarten 1 to Basic 6 (6 teachers for 9 classrooms). A female teacher holds both KG1 and 2 whilst a male teacher (Okra Kwadwo [O.K]) teaches Basic 2 and 3. All Wuruduwurudu teachers have taught their class(es) from five to thirteen years. All, except the headteacher and Teacher O. K, stay in the school community. The rest commute from town every working day to the village. Students live in the rural area.

Of main interest to this study is Teacher O.K. who has spent nine out of the eleven years in the school handling multi-grade classes (Basic 2 and 3). The school has 23 and 42 students in Basic 3 and 2 respectively. English is the primary language of instruction (L2), but Akan/Akuapem Twi is also used to facilitate learning, particularly with younger learners. Teacher O. K additionally holds the position of assistant headteacher of the school.



Figure 1: The 3rd class road which leads to Wuruduwurudu. Personal picture taken by consent of the headteacher.



Figure 2: Wuruduwurudu. Personal picture taken by consent of the headteacher.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study adopts much from unstructured interviews with one teacher (Teacher O.K) and stories/informal interviews with the KG and headteacher during the 2023/2024 end of the academic year (3rd Term). Extracts from the school logbook requesting new teachers have been included as data. The researcher visited the school (multi-grade classes) to observe instructional or contact hours. Interpretive analyses are used to arrive at themes and develop codes. The codes were structured into broader sections of meaning. The researcher performed the analysis.

Limitations and validity

Due to the limited number of interviews from the respondents, I believe that more data from follow-up interviews with SMC executives, educational managers from the district to the national directorate, and the parents, will reveal more strongly constructed findings.

Also, follow-up observations and interviews from the 2024/2025 start of a new academic year (1st Term) could reveal new data. The researcher practised peer debriefing, and tape-recorded interviews, and remained in the school for a long time. Also, I did member checks with Teacher O.K., the KG teacher, and the headmaster to ensure the study's validity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Driving from Accra to Kumasi, the researcher veers left off the well-tarred highway road, to drive up the Coaltar-Dokrochiwa dirt road, pot-holed and rural, finally reaching Wuruduwurudu. There is one additional school serving twelve pockets of villages scattered around. The teaching staff are all trained professionals from towns and cities; all but two (Teacher O.K. and the headteacher) stay in the community where the school is located. The rural community has about ten households. The school has 164 students from KG up to junior high school 3. It has a high admission rate of at least fifteen new students every academic year. The school has electricity but is present in the KG 1 and 2 classes, the staff common room, and the headteacher's office. There are two boreholes, two biogas lavatories and three urinals. However, a makeshift canteen under a mango tree serves the school. The headteacher and staff boast of Wuruduwurudu Basic School as the neatest and most beautiful of all schools within the circuit. Five classrooms (KG 1 and 2, and JHS 1 to 3) are floor tiled to represent modernity in the building. The school's vision is "to equip students with good behaviour and academic excellence" with a specific interest in developing students' personalities- socio-moral, cultural, intellectual, cognitive, physical, and spiritual. Though teachers are consistently present at the school, they are challenged through practices that seem to influence their effective and efficient delivery. Of the many issues concerning road network, transportation fares, accommodation, and parents' concerns about their wards' welfare, one stands out- the limited number of teachers. This has led to the practice of multi-grade teaching. From the respondent's narrative testaments on the main issue are his experiences under the following:

- kind(s) of multi-grade teaching
- how he goes through daily teaching activities
- how the staff members see him
- how the students see him
- how parents and guardians see him
- how supervisors see him
- how he feels.

Kind(s) of multi-grade teaching

"There may be some types of multi-grade teaching around the world but here I can talk about the two types I practice. I teach two lower classes (Basi 2 & 3). Even this term, I teach Basic 1 in addition, since the class teacher is on maternity leave. Therefore, I am handling the whole lower-primary level which is about 65 students. My types of multi-grade teaching are: (1) I sometimes let my students stay in their respective classrooms and

serve them, one after the other (class after class) or, (2) I join the classes together in the village church house or under this (a shed on the school compound). I normally practice the second type when introducing a new strand that cuts across all the levels. The continuity of strands and sub-strands allows for the practice of the merge-type of multi-grade teaching. On the other hand, I employ the first type when assessment forms must match my student's age and ability levels. I cannot assess a Basic 1 student with items for Basic 2 or 3. Also, the first type is good for me when there happens to be differences in the sub-strands to be taught to each or every level".



Figure 3: Basic Three class of Teacher O.K. Personal picture taken by consent of the headteacher.



Figure 4: Basic Two class of Teacher O. K. Personal picture taken by consent of the headteacher.



Figure 5: Basic One class handled by Teacher O.K. during the 3rd Term of the 2023/24 academic year. Personal picture taken by consent of the headteacher.

How he goes through daily teaching activities

“I can say handling a multi-grade class is an art and science. As an art, I improvise and modify ways and means to serve all my students. As a science, it is a systematic practice with the view of arriving at a product. A good product of course because it is difficult to practice in settings like this place. So, as a science of teaching, I normally start most of my days in school with my classroom(s) arrangements (either merged or not, ability and mixed ability groupings). I follow it by joining hands with my students to form classroom rules for good behaviour. One thing about handling multi-grade classes is the issue of class management and discipline. I bet you, at times I beg them to keep quiet and other times though, I know it is banned, I use the cane. Again, during instructional time (contact hours) I mix teacher-centred and learner-centred methods to teach. What I have come to realize is that, at the lower level of education most of the foundational skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) must be consolidated in the learners. This calls for constant and conscious practice spearheaded by the teacher. Therefore, I will say the most practised teaching methodology at this level is teacher-centred. They love stories and films very much so I infuse them in my teachings. Especially when it comes to Creative Arts and the History of Ghana, I show them videos and animations. They love it. Audio-visuals help me very well during instructional delivery.

During an assessment, I hardly mark them wrong. When their answers to assessment items need to be corrected, I give them the chance to do that. Most of the time, we solve the answers together before I mark. At times, I give the assessment items to them on a group basis or whole class basis. With this practice, before I come back to that specific class, they would have helped themselves in understanding what is learnt. However, sometimes they would get lower marks when I deliberately give the slightly above-level assessment items to keep them busy and quiet. The high-achieving students mostly direct and tutor the average and low-achieving ones”.

How the staff members see him

From the headteacher, he sees Teacher O.K. as a very resourceful and hardworking teacher who is keen about his profession. An extract from a recommendation letter from the headteacher to an educational institution dated 10th February 2023 reads:

“A modern teacher with a strong sense of good morals. He exhibits an amazing attitude of professionalism. His work ethic is very good; a master of his subject area. He extends this depth of knowledge in his field to other activities undertaken in the school. What makes him different is the passion he attaches to the job and the desire to succeed at all times. He encourages his students to view obstacles or challenges to succeed, and he has a goal not to quit in anything.”

The K.G. teacher also talks about Teacher O.K. as a professional of very good standing. She talks about him as “well-educated and dedicated to the kids”. To her, she

holds teachers who practice multi-grade teaching in very high esteem because she is also a multi-grade teacher, and knows what goes into handling such classes. Teacher O.K further sees himself in the eyes of the staff as “well respected”. He made mention of a staff member, Sir Kinawi who always praises them (Teacher O.K and KG Madam) as very “talented and skilful” in handling multiple grades every day for almost ten and four years out of their teaching experiences respectively. To Sir Kinawi, it will be very difficult for him to toggle through the different classes at a time. He finally said, “They are doing a very great job”.

How the students see him

Concerning how the student body sees him, he speaks this way

“I have taught multi-grade at the upper-primary level for about six years before moving down here. Most of the students see me as very knowledgeable. The truth is, upon all my workload I sometimes move to the junior high section to handle some subjects. We practice cooperative teaching here. I am Social Studies Education bias therefore; I sometimes teach some strands to the students up there. Not only that, whenever the final year students are due for their Basic Education Certificate Examinations (BECE), the students come to me for evening and early morning classes because I stay with them in the village. I am available to them. So, in the eyes of the students, they see me as a teacher who knows much and a disciplinarian. When it comes to discipline the students will always say, “Okra Kwadwo likes to play with us but when it comes to discipline, eeei, he knows when the time is!”.

How parents and guardians see him

“Not all of them see me as good to them. Some parents of the students I discipline at times attack me verbally for either not allowing them to go for breaks, reprimanding them verbally, or sometimes canning them. Others too see me as helping to nurture their wards for them. The truth is some of these parents even accept that we discipline and punish their wards if their behaviours and attitudes merit such cause. So, some parents see me as a good teacher to their wards and they whilst, others hold an opposite view about me”.

How supervisors see him

“From the experiences I have so far when it comes to educational supervision, I will say it is colourful mixed-balls in a bag. Some supervisors come for checks exhibiting surprise at what I do, empathize with me on the nature of the work I handle, and motivate me. Others come in with the idea of a ‘system executioner’. They are the ones only best in finding faults with whatever I do. They neither bring new ideas on board to help with work, nor convey our plight to the necessary offices for redress. There are countless comments in the log book, and other official letters we have sent to the office for new teachers

to be posted here to support us, but to no avail. The way and manner of some supervisors (SISO) approach us about work is demotivating. Truth be told, many teachers are leaving this district for other places because of the issue of multi-grade teaching coupled with poor attitudes towards us from some SISOs. I have witnessed these two types of personalities from SISOs, but the current is very motivating. He was a 'colleague' teacher from the next village so he understood my plight and that of others.

How he feels

He started by saying "I am doing my best. The best that I can. I know one day I will leave here for another place. The truth is that I want to leave a good impression on my students, their parents, and my colleague staff". Teacher O.K. continued by saying that multi-grade teaching is characterized by positive and negative issues. On the positive, he spoke about the feelings or forming of a "family-life environment" with the students and between the students. "They see themselves as colleagues when I put them together for lessons. Even when they are not together, they still see themselves as one people because they are all taught by one teacher. There is very little intimidation between them. I like that". He further talked about the positives in this way:

"The family-like environment helps them to collaborate and cooperate in learning. They support themselves through most of their learning experiences such as reading and writing, arithmetic, and speaking. Multi-grade teaching is helping me to appreciate individual differences among students and this helps me to practice differentiated instruction. I always feel that I am creating a reliable environment for my students to learn well. Some of my average and weak students can align themselves with the higher achievers and the averages respectively to sit up. I am also able to sit up. I become active throughout the academic year. In all, I can say my multi-grade class is high when it comes to good behaviour and intellectual and academic performance. I feel that they possess very high humanistic ideals due to the rich connections between them".

Concerning negatives or shortfalls, these are excerpts from Teacher O.K. His first comment was about how "very tiring or exhausting" to practice because of the high student population. A summary of his statements: "There are no leaves for you though they are available. I dare not think about that not because I am warned against but, it is the issue of workload. You leave and come back with very much to cover. Going on leave will worsen the inadequacy of teachers here. The children too will be left to either come to school but not to be taught, or sit at home because I am not available. Also, I am sometimes challenged when it comes to individualized teaching. Sometimes I cannot do it well. The children are many. Even when it comes to marking their work, it is very tiring. They will all come for marking. I use up a red pen every week because of marking their assessment items". He talks issues on educational materials and stationery

as follows:

"There is this challenge I meet every day which is inadequate furniture for the students. They are very limited. Not only in my class but throughout the school. The students perch with others on the chairs and stools. I stand to mark all their works. This is a very serious challenge to effective and efficient teaching and learning. I must say. It couples with students' stationery availability. Some will come to school throughout the term with only three exercise books. Some, nothing. Follow-ups to their homes yield little to nothing. I cannot drive away a student because of this issue. They have their educational rights. But how can rights and freedoms lead to growth and development without the necessary machinery?"

Teacher O.K. touched on the inadequacy of teacher training education to nurture "us to handle multi-grade classes, since almost all teaching practices are undertaken in mono-grade classrooms". "There is no in-service training for us here, no motivation for we rural teachers in the form of allowances. It is sometimes very painful to see that colleague teachers handling mono-grades are even paired in the same classrooms in the district and across the country. However, we take the same salaries. We receive no allowances for our additional workload. We stay in a very low infrastructural growth environment too. Other teachers are not accepting to join us here at the villages. Sometimes our colleague staff members will even not lend a helping hand to us. They think that our classrooms are solely ours to handle. I believe all these are the causes of the high teacher attrition rate in our country".

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, I focused on the practices of multi-grade teaching in a rural basic school employing case study narratives from the field to reveal strengths and weaknesses. The realization of good behaviour, high cognitive and intellectual (academic) growth, and better humanistic ideals due to rich diversity and connections within the class are some positive aspects from the practice of multi-grade teaching. However, the other side of the same coin questions how Ghana could achieve the 21st-century global advocacy for quality teaching and learning in education. Can we still reflect on the revelations of this study as "progressive" of the UN SDG 4 according to Little?

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