

Investing in Multi-grade Teaching in Indonesia

Policy Brief

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Multi-grade teaching in action at SDN Gunungsari 4 Batu - Malang, Photo by Rina Arlianti

Multi-grade teaching (MGT) is an important and appropriate approach in Indonesia to reach both its internationally-mandated Education for All targets and Millennium Development Goals and the newly established Minimum Service Standards. MGT also supports the goals of the new RENSTRA: availability, outreach, quality and relevance, equity, and access.

A good definition for multi-grade teaching (MGT), from one of the most complete reviews of good practice in MGT, states that it occurs where “a single teacher is responsible for a class formed of children from two or more year grades.”¹

Why Multi-Grade Teaching in School?

First, it saves the system money. There are currently over 24,000 primary schools in Indonesia with fewer than 90 pupils and over 5000 with fewer than 50. However, because teachers in Indonesia are currently allocated to schools based on the number of classes rather than the number of students, even a school with 50 students might have eight teachers - six class teachers (one of which is also assigned as school principal), and two additional teachers for religion and sports - leading to a student-teacher ratio (STR) of less than 7:1. Thus, in remote and isolated locations where there are many small schools, it is not economically efficient or viable to have one teacher per class.

Inefficient use of resources is exacerbated further in schools with few students and many teachers, which may lead to effective underemployment of teachers, while the system still has to pay them full salaries. A new policy is currently in the

pipeline to make it possible to transfer teachers from teacher-surplus to teacher-deficit regions and schools, so many small schools will eventually have fewer teachers. This makes MGT even more necessary.

Secondly, multi-grade teaching is sound pedagogy. One major problem with the expansion and enrichment of MGT is the perception – of policy-makers, teachers, and parents alike – that it is somehow a second-class or “poor relation” to the traditional mono-grade class. In fact, MGT approaches are seen in many developed countries and progressive public and private systems of education as the approach of **first** choice with clear pedagogic advantages over traditional mono-grade classrooms.

What is the Situation of MGT Globally and in Indonesia?

Globally, a conservative estimate of 30% of children currently in multi-grade classes in all countries yields a world total of 192.45 million. Add this to, say, 50% of currently out-of-school children for whom opportunities to learn would most likely to occur in a multi-grade class. This generates an additional 52 million children for a total of 244.45 million children worldwide for whom a multi-grade pedagogy is likely to be useful. For developing countries alone, the total estimate is 218.60 million.²

In Indonesia, there are no accurate data concerning the extent of MGT. Very incomplete estimates, largely from five districts of the BERMUTU Pilot Project (which focuses on addressing teacher employment and deployment issues, assisted by the World Bank) and the Mainstreaming Good Practices in Basic Education project (assisted by UNICEF) indicate that it is being implemented by teachers trained in MGT techniques, with some supervision and technical assistance, in at least 11 provinces but perhaps only in around 150 schools and madrasahs.

Hundreds of teachers have also completed 10 hours of training, along with five hours of online assignments, in a two-credit module on MGT developed by Universitas Negeri Semarang as part of a consortium of universities and implemented through the distance education S1 upgrading programme of Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia in Bandung. Other practicing teachers have completed another module on MGT in the S1 upgrading course offered by the Open University. Both of

¹ Angela W. Little. **Education for All and Multi-grade Teaching: Challenges and Opportunities** Springer, London, 2006, p. 3.

² Ibid

these programmes complement the modules with a package of print material, audio material, and video and web-based learning material. But the extent to which these teachers are now using MGT techniques is unknown.

Much MGT that occurs is “unplanned” and due to teacher absenteeism. A recent study of remote schools in Indonesia indicated that 17% of teachers in the sample were absent on a given school day.³ And a draft baseline survey designed to assess the impact of the new certification process indicated, through teacher self-report, that SD teachers are absent over 5% of the school year (82% of the time because of illness).⁴

As a result of such absenteeism, other teachers are often faced suddenly with the problem of what to do with an “empty” class. The principal and other teachers may take turns “minding” the class, assigning (or re-assigning) deskwork, keeping the class together and in order, but not moving it forward through the intended curriculum. Class hours are wasted, by both teachers and students, when, in fact, they could be made much more useful through the use of basic MGT techniques.

What Does MGT Look Like, and What Should it Look Like?

There are many kinds of MGT. They range from the most basic (and least useful) – a teacher moving between two grades in two classrooms (or two sections of a divided classroom), teaching different topics to each – to the most advanced (and most useful) – a teacher making a programme for the combined grades, in one space, with a mix of grade-specific and grade-combined activities stressing student participation and collaboration, focused on specific themes, and developed for different levels of ability.

One challenge in Indonesia is the use of MGT in small schools with surplus teachers, which may encourage perverse teaching practices. Often, classes with few students cannot achieve the level of enthusiasm, competition, and interaction seen as necessary for learning. Hence, even in teacher-surplus schools, grades are combined in order to reach that desired threshold of activity. This often leads to “team teaching,” where two or more teachers in a class of, for example, 10 children (e.g., grades 3 and 4) join forces to provide labour-intensive, well-organized, and personalised instruction. This runs the risk, however, of becoming “turn teaching,” where one teacher teaches while the other sits at the back of the room and observes, or even stays home for the day. There is an obvious advantage in implementing MGT in such schools, both in terms of efficiency

as well as quality improvement. However, it would quite inevitably lead to some teachers being rendered redundant.

Experience has shown that there is a critical set of principles which make for good MGT. These include:

- active, child-centred, participatory, cooperative, and self-paced teaching-learning methodologies;
- flexible, theme-oriented curricula and materials;
- a flexible, attractive, child-focused classroom environment;
- strong relevance to the local context and culture;
- active parental and community involvement;
- the teacher as facilitator, motivator, and community resource person;
- class and classroom management which is flexible in nature but structured in terms of the curriculum.

Two other principles of good education are especially facilitated by MGT because it offers:

- a “whole” child approach. The small number of children in a small school; the size of the community around it; the close linkages among early childhood centres, community health posts, kindergarten, and primary school which a small community permits; and the likelihood that teachers come from and/or live in the community make it more possible for the school to be concerned about the “whole” child – not only attendance and academic performance, but also health and nutrition status, family history, and home environment.
- a “whole” school approach. Given that most MGT teaching takes place in small and usually remote, isolated, and poor schools, the competencies required by teachers and principals to function successfully in such contexts go far beyond the classroom techniques of MGT. Improving the quality of a school using MGT therefore implies developing among its staff a range of other relevant skills, behaviours, and attitudes.

How to Expand and Enrich Multi-grade Teaching?

Given the present potential of MGT as good teaching practice and as a tool to rationalise Indonesia’s current oversupply of teachers, the Ministry of National Education should work to expand the reach and enrich the practice of MGT.

In the **short-term**:

A. Improving the quality of data on the extent of multi-grade teaching in Indonesia

A major constraint to the further development and enrichment of MGT is the lack of data concerning the extent to which it takes place – either planned, within schools explicitly labelled as “multi-grade or unplanned due to frequent and/or lengthy teacher absences. The number of existing small schools which would benefit from MGT is also not known. Existing

3 SMERU, *Remote Area Allowances and Absentee Levels for Teachers in Remote Areas*, Jakarta, January 2010

4 World Bank Jakarta, *The Teacher Certification Law, and Student and Teacher Learning: Status, Progress, Results and Challenges*. Work in progress.

information on MGT practice is limited to donor-funded project districts and schools or is of questionable accuracy as a result of the lack of clear definition.

B. Developing richer descriptions of existing modes of multi-grade teaching, management, and support in Indonesia

While quantitative data concerning the extent of MGT in Indonesia are rare, the qualitative descriptions of the range of approaches to MGT in the classroom, to its management, and to its support from the district office are even more limited. How is MGT done well in classrooms? How is it managed best both in teacher-deficit and teacher-surplus schools? How is it supported most effectively through principals, supervisors, and teacher groups and in various kinds of in-service training provided to teachers?

C. Developing a more explicit policy on MGT, more comprehensive guidance on its implementation, and more flexible regulations concerning MGT practice adaptable to individual school, community, and cultural contexts

MGT has only recently been implemented in districts involved in a range of donor-supported projects but is virtually unknown in many other districts with large numbers of small schools. MONE and District Education Offices (Dinas), at all levels, must more actively promote the use of MGT and develop a set of guidelines, training programmes and materials; good examples of MGT curricula, syllabi, and lesson plans; and good practices in order to ensure the spread of MGT, including its insertion into future district-level RENSTRA.

The likely range of approaches to MGT, deriving from the immense diversity of Indonesia's social-cultural context and education system, makes it imperative that any future regulations concerning MGT strike a balance between ensuring its adherence to the core characteristics of good practice described above and the need to be adaptable to individual school, community, and cultural contexts.

These short-term actions imply the need for both clearer lines of responsibility for the development of various aspects of MGT – e.g., teacher training, and materials development – and a unit more clearly dedicated to the further expansion and enrichment of MGT.

In the **longer-term**, a number of other important actions must be taken, including:

D. Revising teacher education and support to include MGT

Success in the delivery of MGT depends essentially on the capacities (knowledge, skills, and attitudes) of teachers. This

makes it essential, first, to ensure that all teachers working now in small schools learn good MGT practice through in-service education. However, because virtually all teacher trainees in pre-service programmes will need MGT techniques either in small schools or in regular schools during periods of extended teacher absenteeism, MONE should ensure that all pre-service education programmes include a unit and practice teaching on MGT.

In support of these efforts, of course, Dinas and sub-district staff, supervisors, district-level facilitators, and principals must also understand and be able to advocate for MGT, reinforce its concepts, facilitate its implementation, and mentor its practitioners.

E. Revising curricula, texts, and (low-cost) teaching materials to reflect a multi-grade, local-content approach

MGT must start from the national curriculum and approved textbooks but will require several revisions:

- training materials to assist MG teachers and principals in managing the curriculum and students for a MG context
- adaptations to the curricula to facilitate a MGT approach (e.g., developing a thematic rather than a grade-focused orientation in some subjects)
- use of locally relevant materials (preferably made, with little cost, in the school) linked to the particular social, cultural, and economic life of the community

F. Promoting community support and participation for small schools

A small school with multi-grade classrooms is likely to play a more important role in the small communities which surround it than its size would imply. If the teachers come from the community and, in ethnic and linguistic minority areas and speak the local language, the school is likely to have a closer link to the community. Its teachers know the parents in contexts other than the school; its classrooms might be used for pre-school and adult education classes; and the teaching experiences it provides might be seen as relevant to the lives which its students will eventually lead. The community feels it "owns" the school and is "of" the school as much as the school is "of" the community.

G. Ensuring a whole school approach to small school planning and management

Because of the location of MG classes in these communities, the small school context requires more skills of its staff than multi-grade teaching techniques. Small schools have their own particular planning and management challenges – small budgets and contributions from the community, frequent teacher absenteeism if the teachers travel long distances to

the school, and relatively little support from distant district and sub-district offices.

H. Establishing a clear regulatory framework that sets MGT as the approach of first choice, especially in small schools

It should be noted that the current regulatory framework actually accommodates MGT in primary schools. No regulation stipulates that one class should be comprised of one grade only, and Government Regulation 19/2005 authorizes schools to assign teachers “according to their needs.” Furthermore, MONE Regulation 15/2010 on Minimum Service Standards stipulates that a primary school should have at least one teacher per 32 students and a minimum total of 6 teachers per school, with at least 4 teachers per school in special areas. Such arrangements would clearly give room for MGT.

However, a more explicit regulatory framework is still needed to establish MGT as the preferred option. There are already planned regulations in the pipeline that would address teacher deployment and school staffing issues, including regulations on the strategy to meet teacher needs in small schools and on integrating secondary school subject teachers into cluster-based teachers. The regulatory framework for MGT can be incorporated into either or both of the aforementioned policies.

I. Considering the implications of MGT for school budgets and teacher remuneration

A further challenge to the system is the financial implications of its practice. Although teachers in isolated, remote schools already receive added incentives, some MG teachers and principals would argue that MG schools face challenges which require additional support; this includes additional routine and BOS funding and special incentives to MG teachers given the additional work they are said to face in preparing for and handling two or more classes. Given the lack of training and technical assistance now available in regard to MGT and a lack of motivation to practice MGT and do it well, extra incentives to teachers using MGT should be provided.

Summary

Multi-grade teaching is essential and appropriate for a variety of contexts in Indonesia, particularly in remote, isolated schools with a limited number of teachers. Its focus on child-centred, interactive, participatory, and collaborative learning, across ages and grades; its adaptability to a range of cultural and school-specific contexts; its cost-efficiency in creating viable teacher-student ratios; and its potential reinforcement of linkages among pre-school, primary school, and community should make it an approach of “first choice” for many schools in Indonesia.

About BEC-TF

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The findings, interpretations and conclusions expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of the Government of Indonesia, the Government of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, or the European Commission.

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