



Current policy and practice concerning multigrade teaching in Thailand



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ABSTRACT

This study explored current policy and practice concerning multigrade teaching (MGT) and proposed policy options for improving the quality of MGT in Thailand. The study consisted of: 1) a review of policy documents and research about MGT; and 2) a qualitative study collecting data through classroom observations, individual interviews, and focus group discussions in four small schools with best practice in MGT. The qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed that there was no national policy on MGT in Thailand. MGT existed only as one strategy to improve the education quality of small schools. There was some MGT training for in-service teachers, but no MGT course for pre-service teachers. The teachers, school administrators, school boards, parents, and students had a good understanding and awareness of MGT in promoting quality education for students in small schools. They gradually developed positive attitudes toward MGT from their appreciation of the increased quality of school and student learning achievement. The stakeholders' understanding and awareness of MGT were key factors for the successful implementation of MGT in small schools. A school administrator was regarded as a key person leading to best practice in MGT. Based on the results of this study, continual development is urged regarding MGT and the inclusion of MGT in the national policy and pre-service teacher education of Thailand.

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Introduction

In Thailand, the Ministry of Education (MOE) takes responsibility for promoting the quality of basic education (primary and secondary education) for every child everywhere including rural and outreach areas (Ministry of Education, 2001). Of the total primary schools in Thailand, during the academic years 2007–2011, the numbers of small schools were 13,518 (39.73%), 14,056 (44.30%), 14,397 (45.82%), 14,638 (46.83%), and 14,638

(46.83%), respectively, and that trend seems to be increasing. The common problem of small schools is a teacher shortage. The solutions are hiring more teachers to fill the gap or combining students from more than one grade to learn together in the same class taught by the same teacher known as “multigrade teaching” (MGT). Since 2006, the Office of the Basic Education Commission (OBEC) has applied MGT as one of several strategies to improve the educational quality of small schools in Thailand. Regarding this, MGT has not been only an internal factor but also an informed alternative through which OBEC seeks to get some good solutions for small school improvement (Office of the Basic Education Commission, 2013). OBEC sent a team to visit primary schools implementing MGT in New

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Zealand and tried to find an appropriate way of implementing MGT in the Thai context. Subsequently, in 2008, OBEC officially piloted MGT in 14 primary schools and then extended it to 800 primary schools nationwide in the same year (MGR Online Team, 2008).

Literature Review

MGT in the Asia–Pacific Context

The Education for All Global Monitoring Report (The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2012) shows that although more than two-thirds of the countries in the Asia–Pacific region have registered net enrollment rates of 90 percent or more at the primary level, overall regional progress has been uneven and slow. The region still has large numbers of out-of-school children (20.1 million in 2010 at the primary level) and faces a challenge in providing quality primary education.

Many countries in the Asia–Pacific region have millions of people living in scattered, thinly populated highlands, mountainous regions, and on small islands, which lead to many difficulties in delivering quality education. In such a context, education is generally provided through small schools with low enrollment and scarcity of resources, support, and teachers. Thus, MGT becomes the only option for providing education to children (Little, 2001; Mansoor, 2011). Little (2005) reported that the students who had learned with MGT had comparable performance or even performed better in some instances than those who had learned in mono-grade classes. The Save the Children UK (2005) reported that MGT can support the sustainability of small communities by preventing the migration of families to more populated areas for better schooling. MGT is commonly used in most countries in the Asia–Pacific region. In India, in 1996, 84 percent of primary schools consisting of five grades had three teachers or fewer (Little, 2005). In Western China, 25–33 percent of children learn in one-teacher multigrade schools (Jun, 2009). In addition, the prevalence of MGT is quite high in Nepal (Takako, 2009).

Effective MGT requires a clear policy and practice (UNESCO, 1989). Despite widespread use of MGT, many countries did not have national policies to guide the management, administration, financing, curriculum provision, deployment and training of teachers of multigrade schools (Blum & Diwan, 2007; Little, 2001) or lacked the knowhow to integrate MGT into educational planning and teacher training systems (Mulkeen & Cathal, 2009). Takako (2009) reported that poor teacher-preparedness in Nepal reduced the quality of learning in multigrade settings and policymakers, parents, and other stakeholders often had negative attitudes towards MGT. Mulryan-Kyne (2007) reported that documentation on the effectiveness of existing MGT policies and practices was rare.

MGT in the Thai Context

In 2011, there were 31,255 schools under OBEC and, of this number, 14,638 (46.83%) were classified as “a small school” having less than 120 students. From the 2012 to 2014 academic years, the number of small schools in Thailand gradually increased (Table 1).

OBEC (2006a) concluded four major problems were faced by small schools in Thailand: teacher shortage, heavy school workload, teachers' teaching outside their expertise, and lack of morale support, budget, and resources. Thus, OBEC (2006b) launched the “All for Education” policy for improving the quality of small schools and MGT was mentioned as one strategy to cope with the teacher shortage problem and improve students' learning achievements. This situation showed that MGT has been advocated in the national level. In this regard, UNICEF Thailand has been at the forefront of support for MGT as the essential pedagogical choice because one goal of UNICEF Thailand is to improve the equity and quality of education for all children in Thailand, regardless of gender, social and economic status, or ethnicity and religious beliefs (UNICEF Thailand, nd)

While there is enough justification for promoting MGT, there is a lack of research about current policy and practice concerning MGT in Thailand. The objectives of this study were to explore current policy and practice concerning MGT in Thailand and further propose policy options to improve MGT practice in Thailand. The research questions were: a) What are the current policies and practices concerning MGT in Thailand? b) What are feasible policy options and strategies for improving the quality of MGT in Thailand?

Methods

The study consisted of a review of policy documents and research on MGT, and a qualitative study collecting data from four small schools with best practice in MGT (two from Sakonnakhon province and two from Phangnga province). The four small schools were derived from the Extreme Case Sampling technique (Creswell, 2005), which focuses on the participants with unique or special characteristics. In particular to this study, the unique characteristic was best practice in implementing MGT, which other small schools can and should learn from. Furthermore, Sakonnakhon and Phangnga provinces were selected because both provinces had participated in the pilot project of implementing MGT in Thailand conducted by OBEC since 2008. The acronyms used to represent the participating schools were MGT School 1, MGT School 2, MGT School 3 and MGT School 4. The individual interviews were conducted with one policy maker, two provincial officers, two educational supervisors, four teachers, and four school administrators. The focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with four groups of parents, school boards, and students. In addition, MGT in practice was observed in four classrooms. The protocol of the interviews, FGDs, and classroom observation were validated through an expert meeting conducted by UNESCO Bangkok, Thailand. The data were analyzed quantitatively using simple descriptive statistics and qualitatively using thematic analysis.

Results and Discussion

Policy Documents and Research About MGT in Thailand

The small schools in Thailand commonly faced problems of teacher shortages and a decreasing number of students. From the review of policy documents in Thailand,

Table 1
Number of small schools in Thailand

Academic Year	Number of students							Total
	0	1–20	21–40	41–60	61–80	81–100	101–120	
2012	116	591	2,091	3,163	3,568	3,017	2,270	14,816
2013	162	706	2,366	3,293	3,574	2,886	2,399	15,386
2014	197	793	2,403	3,372	3,520	2,819	2,402	15,506

Source: Information Group, the Bureau of Basic Education Policy and Planning, OBEC

interestingly, MGT is not explicitly mentioned in the national policy and the basic education curriculum, which is similar to the observations by [Blum and Diwan \(2007\)](#) and [Little \(2001\)](#). Many government documents ([OBEC 2006a,b,c, 2008](#)) mentioned MGT implicitly as one strategy to improve learning quality of small schools in Thailand. Thus, there is a need for the inclusion of MGT in the national policy that will potentially lead to the explicit action and sustainable development of MGT in Thailand. OBEC has conducted several MGT workshops for in-service teachers, school administrators, and educational supervisors. Regarding MGT, however, we found no course on MGT at the pre-service level. There is a need for designing a pre-service teacher course on MGT.

From the ThaiLis (Thai Library Integrated System) database, there were 34 studies related to MGT conducted during 2006–2014. They included: [Pathraphithanon \(2006\)](#), [Seesang \(2007\)](#), [Songserm \(2007\)](#), [Nguantong \(2009\)](#), [Songserm \(2009\)](#), [Inrit \(2010\)](#), [Sonsomnuek \(2010\)](#), [Muenhong \(2011\)](#), [Kultangwattana \(2011\)](#), [Samanmit \(2011\)](#), [Bureau of Academic Affairs and Educational Standards \(2011\)](#), [Krittayanawat \(2011\)](#), [Sukkasem \(2011\)](#), [Thangkoksee \(2011\)](#), [Palasak \(2012\)](#), [Meeson \(2012\)](#), [Pengdee \(2012\)](#), [Somboon \(2012\)](#), [Suwanrat \(2012\)](#), [Hongmala \(2013\)](#), [Tonsri \(2013\)](#), and [Hankaew \(2014\)](#). The participants in MGT research varied and included students, teachers, school administrators, parents, school committees, educational supervisors, and experts. Of the 34 studies, 67.65 percent (23 studies) involved qualitative research. The popular years for MGT research were 2011–2012 (12 papers per year) that were undertaken 5 years after OBEC announced the use of MGT in 2006 (see [Table 2](#)).

The areas of MGT research were diverse and the popular ones were instruction, administration, and teacher professional development for MGT. The studies about MGT learning units/plans reported their success in developing

students' learning achievement. The review urged more research on good practice of MGT and effective learning environment for MGT.

MGT Practice in Thailand

Context of Participating MGT Schools

MGT School 1 had three female teachers and had implemented MGT since 2009 in four classrooms: Kindergartens 1–2, Grades 1–2, Grades 3–4, and Grades 5–6. MGT School 2 had five male and two female teachers and had implemented MGT since 2009 in two classrooms: Kindergartens 1–2 and Grades 5–6. MGT School 3 had three female teachers and had implemented MGT since 2005 in three classrooms: Kindergartens 1–2, Grades 2–3, and Grades 5–6. MGT School 4 had five female teachers and had implemented MGT since 2009 in three classrooms: Kindergartens 1–2, Grades 1–3, and Grades 4–6. The school administrators commonly considered the number of students and grades, students' abilities and backgrounds, and teachers' abilities in MGT when making decisions about arranging students into a multigrade class. [Songsomnuek \(2010\)](#) summarized three models of multigrade arrangement: Model A—mixing three grades, Model B—mixing two grades, and Model C—mixing some grades. The mixing models found in this study were diverse. MGT School 1 employed Model B, MGT Schools 2 and 3 employed Model C, and MGT School 4 employed Model A.

During the academic years 2012–2014, the number of students in the participating schools remained relatively stable. MGT School 1 had 44, 52 and 47 students in the academic years 2012–2014, respectively. MGT School 2 had 60, 66 and 66, respectively, MGT School 3 had 40, 42 and 45, respectively, and MGT School 4 had 42, 43 and 39, respectively. The schools had enough buildings and financial support to conduct MGT effectively. The parents and communities accepted and supported MGT in the schools in various ways. This finding was similar to [Suwanrat \(2012\)](#), but in contrast with [Songserm \(2007\)](#), who found that many small schools adopted MGT with a lack of school buildings, learning resources, and budgets because they faced difficulties in raising fund in their communities.

MGT Practice

The participating teachers were coded as T1, T2, T3, and T4. T1 had taught at MGT School 1 for 30 years and had 6-year's experience in MGT. T2 had taught at MGT School 2 for 34 years and had used MGT for 8 years. T3 had taught at MGT School 3 for 20 years and had 10-year's experience in

Table 2
Area of MGT research

Area of MGT study	Number of research projects
Development and implementation of MGT learning units/plans	10
Teacher professional development for MGT	6
School administration for MGT	4
School administration and instruction for MGT	4
Current states, problems, and needs for MGT	4
Teachers' teaching methods in MGT	2
Learning environment in multigrade classroom	2
Learning management for MGT	1
Good practice of MGT	1

MGT. T4 had taught at MGT School 4 for 37 years and had used MGT for 8 years. All teachers had attended MGT training sessions provided by OBEC and realized their usefulness. From interviews, T1 said that “I can apply what I got from the MGT training in managing my classroom and teaching”. T2 reflected that “The training helped improve my understanding about the core principle of MGT, MGT and learning activities, and MGT lesson plans.” T3 said that “I applied MGT lesson plans in grouping students and setting teaching and learning activities. I adapted them to my classroom context.” T4 stated that “The training helped me a lot in administration and instruction about MGT until I am now a lead person in MGT in this province”. Normally, the teachers employed the MGT lesson plans provided by OBEC. All stated that OBEC’s MGT lesson plans were useful in helping their students learn. In addition, the schools applied some extra activities they created to suit their school and local contexts. This finding was similar to those reported by Suwanrat (2012), the Bureau of Academic Affairs and Educational Standards (2011), and Inrit (2010).

The teachers started their MGT by grouping all students to introduce the topic. Then, they assigned tasks for students in each grade and supervised each group until they had completed the tasks. The teachers asked some older students to help teach the younger ones. At the end, the teachers grouped all students again and concluded the lesson. The format of MGT found here was similar to the grouping-splitting-grouping format found by Samanmit (2011). However, the teachers still employed a mono-grade teaching in a multigrade class that was similar to Tonsri (2013), who found that although teachers mixed students from different grades into a multigrade class, they did not teach in an integrated fashion.

In contrast to Songserm (2007) who found that primary teachers commonly lacked knowledge of and ability in MGT, the teachers in this study did have enough understanding of MGT and could conduct MGT effectively perhaps because they were all prepared as a result of attending several training sessions on MGT. This is supported by Suwanrat (2012), who found that teachers in best-practice MGT schools had had a chance to attend MGT training sessions and had both internal and external supervision to enable them to successfully conduct MGT. The school administrator also promoted teacher morale. Additionally, the Bureau of Academic Affairs and Educational Standards (2011) found that school administrators tried to promote teacher morale by conducting MGT and encouraged them to join the MGT workshops. They also supplied essential materials for MGT to their teachers.

Regarding supervision and MGT, the educational supervisors and school administrators observed the teachers involved in MGT gave feedback to improve teaching. Common feedback was on teaching methods, teaching materials, and classroom environment. Suwanrat (2012) found that the school administrator in MGT-best practice schools realized the importance of MGT and understood it. The Bureau of Academic Affairs and Educational Standards (2011) found that school administrators set meetings to communicate with their teachers about MGT and to persuade them to use MGT. School administrators

enhanced their teachers’ understanding of MGT by organizing MGT best-practice school visits and creating an intra-school network on MGT.

Stakeholders’ Attitudes towards MGT

Overall, the participants had positive attitudes towards MGT. The policymaker stated that, presently, teachers and school administrators had a better understanding of MGT and a more positive attitude toward MGT.

Interviewer: Do you think that MGT is successful in Thailand? Why?

Policy maker: I think...it is successful. I must tell you...previously, MGT is not a culture for teachers and schools. At first, everybody viewed MGT negatively. But, now everybody is OK. Most of them understand that MGT can solve the problem of teacher shortage. They now view MGT more positively (Policy maker, Interview)

The provincial officers supported MGT as a main approach for the small schools facing teacher shortages; however, they stated that MGT led to a heavier workload. The educational supervisors supported the promotion of MGT, but expressed concern about the sustainability of MGT in Thailand because of the launch of new policy on using DLTV in small schools. The school administrators and teachers regarded MGT as an effective approach for small schools. The students reflected that they enjoyed learning with MGT because they had chances to talk, work, do activities, and play together with others from different grades. The older students reflected the benefit of MGT regarding the review of knowledge learned from the previous year.

The positive attitudes of the school administrators, teachers, and students toward MGT in this study were similar to the results reported by Muenhong (2011) and Kultangwattana (2011). That most school administrators regarded MGT as being appropriate to small schools because teachers could know their students better from teaching them for more than one year and MGT could develop students individually and continually. Muenhong (2011) commented that teachers reflected on the effectiveness of MGT in solving the teacher shortage and monitoring student learning individually and that students loved to learn with MGT. Kultangwattana (2011) found that school administrators and teachers considered that MGT was successful in adjusting the curriculum, teaching, and roles of students, teachers, school administrators, and parents. However, Takako (2009) and Tonsri (2013) found that teachers had negative attitudes toward MGT because it took more instruction time than mono-grade teaching and teachers had to teach different contents at the same time.

The participating parents reflected positive attitudes toward MGT including: improving student reading, writing, and speaking skills; students learning with and from others; older students helping younger ones learn and having a chance to review knowledge; younger students knowing next-year’s topics; and longer teacher–student relationships. However, some parents were concerned that some slow students may interfere with learning by

older ones and students may remember content from other grades and then get confused.

Interviewer: *How do you feel about the quality of MGT in this school?*

Parents: *The teacher teaches well, the students learn well. In many competitions, the students from this school could perform well...I am happy with that, with MGT (Parent C in MGT School 2, Focus group discussion)*

The finding that the parents had positive attitudes towards MGT was similar to Muenhong (2011), who reported that the parents appreciated MGT because the teachers paid attention to students and had a commitment to MGT. The Bureau of Academic Affairs and Educational Standards (2011) also found that more than a half of the parents were satisfied with the improvement in the students. Regarding the parents' concern about the slow learners in multigrade classes, Songserm (2007) suggests that MGT teachers should prepare a remedial period for a special group of students such as slow learners.

The school boards appreciated the success of MGT regarding improving students' reading and writing skills and O-NET scores, which was not different from learning in a mono-grade class. They stated that in a multigrade class, teachers had more time and could take more thorough care of all students. The school boards' positive attitudes toward MGT was similar to Muenhong (2011), who found that school boards realized that MGT could solve the teacher shortage. However, some school boards in this study were concerned that the different backgrounds and abilities of students in a multigrade class may affect their learning. Songserm (2007) also found that some students did not understand the nature of learning with MGT and lacked self-learning skills that could impede their learning in a multigrade class.

Proposed Policy and Strategy for Successful Implementation of MGT

The participants suggested that the small school consolidation policy should be implemented with more detail. MGT should not be implicitly regarded only as one of several strategies to improve the educational quality of small schools, but it should be explicitly included in the new national policy that will sustainably improve MGT in Thailand. The strategies for successful implementation of MGT in Thailand included building school networks on MGT, MGT best-practice schools taking the lead, supporting continuing teacher professional development on MGT, promoting the morale of MGT teachers and school administrators, and raising community understanding of and involvement in MGT.

In the schools with best practice in MGT, a school administrator is highly regarded as a key person driving the success of implementing MGT. Additionally, the stakeholders' understanding and awareness of MGT were key factors for the successful implementation of MGT in small schools. Similarly, Suwanrat (2012) found that a school administrator in a MGT best-practice school possessed leadership, realized his/her roles and duties, and employed a variety of methods to raise stakeholders' awareness of MGT. Finally, Songserm (2007) suggested that administrators in

MGT schools should raise the awareness of teachers, parents, and communities of MGT as an essential way to solve the teacher shortage in small schools. They should work closely with teachers and cooperate continuously with parents, communities, and local organizations.

Implications

For sustainable development of MGT in small schools, this study urges the explicit inclusion of MGT in the national policy of Thailand. Effective implementation of MGT in a small primary school requires strong collaboration from the stakeholders both inside and outside the school. The school administrator must cultivate awareness of MGT in teachers, promote teachers' understanding of MGT, and support teachers when they implement MGT in their classrooms. The parents, school board, and community must continually support the school needs for funding and workforce. Furthermore, pre-service teacher preparation in MGT should be mandatory through the design and implementation of MGT courses in teacher institutes in Thailand. Lastly, there should be continuing professional development of MGT for in-service teachers.

Conflict of interest

None declared.

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