

# The Opinions Of Primary School Teachers Who Taught In Multi-Grade Classrooms On Multigrade Class Instructional Practices

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## *Abstract*

*The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological research was to gather primary school teachers' views regarding multi-grade classrooms in detail. Data was collected during the first semester of the 2019-2020 school year from 20 primary school teachers in Izmir, Turkey who taught in multi-grade classrooms in the past. The snowball sampling method was applied. Semi-structured interviews with seven open-ended questions, developed by the researchers basing on the related literature, were used. The content analysis technique was applied during the analysis. MAXQDA-18 was used to organize, code, and analyze the data.*

**Keywords:** *Primary School Teachers, Multi-Grade Classrooms, Phenomenological Method*

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## Introduction

This research aims at determining the advantages and disadvantages of multi grade classrooms from teachers' perspectives who taught in multi grade classrooms in the past, and are teaching at single grade classrooms at present. In addition, teachers' job satisfaction in both types of classes as well as the metaphors they use to define multi grade classrooms are also investigated in detail in this study. Multi grade classrooms are where students from different ages, who are in different grades and of different skill levels come together in one classroom, and are taught by one teacher (Erdem, 2004). Multi grade classrooms serve to fulfill students' needs of education where they reside within a reasonable cost (Checchi & Paola, 2017). The general opinion regarding multi grade classrooms is usually so negative in Turkey that almost every political party leader claims to give an end to multi grade classrooms during their pre-election speeches. Also, education unions frequently voice complaints regarding these classes.

Furthermore, the Turkish government in 1997 in line with the "Keeping up with the Century Project" initiated a law which predicted that multi grade classrooms be given an end gradually (The Law regarding the Changes in Primary School Education and Education in General, 1997), but this was not put into practice. While multi grade classroom model is viewed as a "problem" in Turkey, it is also viewed as an alternative model to traditional classroom teaching in primary schools in the western countries because of its educational advantages even though some constraints such as inadequate number of classrooms, teachers, and students are not applicable (Taşdemir, 2012). What kind of a practice is multi grade classrooms? What kind of advantages and difficulties does this model offer? Is prejudism toward multi grade classrooms by some people in Turkey based on fair reasons? This research aims to test this bias toward multi grade classrooms from the point view of teachers who implemented this model.

Many studies conducted on teaching in multi grade classrooms in Turkey state that this model offers both some advantages and disadvantages. The advantages can be summarized as follows (Akbaşlı & Pilten, 1999; Köklü, 2000; Köksal, 2003; Şahin, 2003): Students in multi grade classrooms are able to develop important skills such as study skills, self-learning, managing their own studies and conducting research. Furthermore, multi grade classrooms offer individual development chances to students on subjects they are interested in and talented in, based on their individual differences. Multi grade classrooms offer students a chance of individual development in the subjects they are interested in and receive education in line with their individual differences. Students in higher grades are also able to review their previous knowledge while coaching students in lower grades. When students of different ages, backgrounds, and skills share the same class, they are able to develop their socialization skills and emotional skills better. Skapski (1960) and Logue (2006) also stated that when students of different ages come into groups, they comply with the rules more than students in the same age groups, and their reading and language skills better improve.

The disadvantages of multi grade classrooms in Turkey can also be summarized as follows (Akbaşlı & Pilten, 1999; Akdoğan, 2007; Gözler, 2009; Köklü, 2000; Köksal, 2003; Özben, 1997; Palavan & Göçer, 2017; Yıldız & Köksal, 2009): Class preparations are very time-consuming for teachers who aim for an effective and independent self-study time for their students. Therefore, it

becomes difficult to achieve all objectives in the curriculum. In addition, not all teachers are equipped with the necessary skills and experience to teach in multi grade classrooms. Recent university graduates may be assigned as “principal authorized teachers” to schools that apply multi grade classroom models. This creates problems for them in fulfilling all their duties both as principles and multi grade classroom teachers. This research aims to reveal multi grade classroom teachers’ opinions regarding the model in detail, and whether the advantages and disadvantages of the model stated in the literature are justified in their opinions. In addition, this research hopes to contribute to the literature by determining the participants’ job satisfaction levels in both types of classes.

In line with the above-mentioned reasons, this research will provide important data regarding; a) the disadvantages of multi grade classroom practices in Turkey and precautions to minimize them, based on the opinions of teachers who taught in multi grade classrooms in the past. (b) the advantages of multi grade classroom practices in Turkey from the viewpoint of teachers, to prevent those classes from being viewed as a problem, (c) this research will contribute to the literature, and (d) will provide data to policymakers.

## **How Did Multi Grade Classroom Practices Start?**

Many developing countries have faced several problems regarding education with the onset of the Industrial Revolution. The most important of these problems is how to provide for the education of school aged children who are not currently attending schools, and later, how to provide them with more specialized education (Brunswic and Valerien, 2004).

The second half of the nineteenth century, in both Europe and North America, the school with a single teacher or with multi grade classes was still the dominant organizational model in primary education. With the advent of the industrial revolution and urbanization, this model was gradually replaced by the education system that has become the norm, with enrolments by age and by homogeneous grades. However, the model of the one-teacher school and the school with multi grade classes persisted in rural areas (Valerien, 2004, pp.23).

In Miller’s (1989) opinion, however, graded school systems facilitate the management of students by bringing a lot of students together rather than meeting students’ individual needs. Furthermore, they are based on unrealistic assumptions such as expecting students to be at the same developmental stages because they are in the same class.

Even though single grade classrooms have become the norm, many countries continue multi grade classroom practices, especially in rural areas with lower population density. While multi grade classroom practice is mostly identified with developing countries, this practice is used in many countries of the world. Peru, Sri Lanka, Norway, Vietnam, England, France, Caribbean, India, United States of America, New Zealand, Colombia and Samoa are some of the countries which employ multi grade classrooms (UNESCO, 2001). According to Little (2004), many European countries, as well as the USA and Canada, offer multi grade class systems, the highest proportion being in primary levels. In 1988, 40% of primary schools in northern parts of Australia

were multi grade classrooms. In the year 2000, 25% of primary school students in England, and in 2002, 21,6% in Northern Ireland were receiving education in multi grade classrooms.

## **Multi Grade Classrooms in Turkey**

The population density of Turkey varies and is scattered in terms of residential areas. In addition, as the number of residential areas increases whilst their populations remain low, the number of students per class in primary schools decreases. Assigning a teacher to each class becomes more challenging. Therefore, it is advantageous to combine classes and have only one teacher assigned (MEB, 1995 cited by Öztürk, 2001). In addition to teaching at multi grade classrooms, many of the teachers also work as “principal authorized teacher”. As a result, there is an increase in teachers’ workloads and responsibilities.

Teaching in multi grade classrooms in Turkey has been taking place for a long time. After the Republic was declared, this practice became necessary for three reasons: low numbers of students, low numbers of teachers and low numbers of classrooms (Bayar & Topal, 2020). Today, however, the most important reason is the dramatic drop in the number of students due to the massive migration from villages to big cities. Suppose there are not enough students for a single class system in residential areas or there are not enough teachers or classrooms. In that case, transporting students to schools, offering boarding schools in different regions and implementing multi grade classes can resolve this problem (İnce & Şahin, 2016). Multi grade classes are born out of necessity and they are usually offered in Turkey's rural villages and are exclusively applied to primary school levels (Erdem, 2004; Külekçi, 2013). A new law regarding big city municipalities’ establishment and city bordering was established in 2012, and legal entities of some villages and towns which are located in 29 cities were abolished. The small municipalities and villages were included in the borders of the municipality of the town that they are located (Resmi Gazete, 2012). According to published statistics regarding post-2012 formal education by the National Ministry of Education there is no formal tally of the exact number of schools offering multi grade classes. The National Ministry of Education (MEB) however, declared that the number of students studying in multi grade classrooms in rural areas made up 10% of children attending primary schools. Furthermore, the number of teachers teaching in multi grade classrooms amounted to 7934 (Birgün Gazetesi, 2019). MEB (2020) also stated in a newspaper article dated June 30th that 7000 schools were offering multi grade classes to 128,432 students during the 2020-2021 school year.

The first and the second grade students make up Group A and the third and the fourth grade students make up Group B in multi grade classes in Turkey. If there is only one teacher available Groups A and B are taught together, and if there are two teachers Group A is assigned to one teacher, and Group B is assigned to another, and these groups are taught in different classrooms. It is recommended that if there are three teachers available, the first grade receives single grade education, the second and the third grade receive multi grade education, and the fourth grade receives single grade education (MEB, 2012). If schools have two or more classrooms and the student number is between 10 to 21 then one teacher is required. If the student number is between 21 to 41 then two teachers, and if the student number is more than 41 then three teachers are

assigned to the schools (The Regulation Regarding Standard Staff for Teachers and Administrators Teaching in Schools under National Ministry of Education, 2014).

The lessons' content, aim and objectives in multi grade classes are the same as those of single grade classes. Nevertheless, multi grade classes are split into two parts: one with the teacher and one focused on assignments. The lessons with the teacher are when the teacher directly works with the students and the activities are done together. The lessons with assignments is where students study independently and learn by themselves most of the time (Erdem, 2004; Şahin, 2003).

## **Multi Grade Classrooms From The Viewpoint of Right to Education**

Even though multi grade classes have some disadvantages when we evaluate this model in terms of Right to Education, it is essential to continue this practice after making some improvements because it prevents young primary school students from attending boarding schools or travelling long distances by school bus. Özsoy (2014) states everybody is born with unlimited learning potential, and their ability to decide freely regarding whether to continue their education or not is acquired through further education. Therefore, just as the right to live is given to everybody regardless of age, and regardless of how it is lived, the right to receive education should be given to everyone. This makes education an indispensable right by nature.

Education was recognized as a human right for the first time through the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). The declaration constitutes the starting point and the framework for the right to education globally (Lohrenscheit, 2019). All states should provide its citizens with four principles namely "availability of education" "accessibility" "acceptability" and "adaptability" under the right of education (Karan, 2017). Multi grade classes should especially be explained from the viewpoint of "availability of education" and "accessibility" principles. Availability refers to the adequate number of schools built by the state, and the adequate number of teachers employed by the state in these schools, teachers' being equipped with the necessary professional skills and qualifications, schools' being equipped with the necessary equipment and infrastructure, adequate educational materials'--of sufficient quantity and of high quality--as well as the states' not shutting down the schools without justification (Karan, 2017). Accessibility refers to everybody--regardless of their religion, language, race, culture, class and regional differences--having the right to receive and benefit from the same quality of education (İnal, 2009a; 2009b).

In light of this information, the objective of this research is to derive the detailed opinions of teachers who taught in multi grade classes. The following questions were asked:

1. What are the opinions of teachers who taught in multi grade classes in the past regarding the advantages of multi grade classes for students?
2. What are the opinions of teachers who taught in multi grade classes in the past regarding the disadvantages of multi grade classes for students?
3. What are the opinions of teachers who taught in multi grade classes in the past regarding the advantages of multi grade classes for teachers?

4. What are the opinions of teachers who taught in multi grade classes in the past regarding the disadvantages of multi grade classes for teachers?
5. What are the opinions of teachers who taught in multi grade classes in the past regarding the job satisfaction levels from multi grade classes?
6. What are the opinions of teachers who taught in multi grade classes in the past regarding their job satisfaction levels from single grade classes?
7. Which metaphors do teachers who taught in multi grade classes in the past use to explain teaching in multi grade classes?

## Method

This section explains the research design, the population, the participants, data collection instruments, data collection methods, and data analysis methods.

### The Research Design

This research is a qualitative study investigating the opinions of primary school teachers regarding multi grade classes. The 20 participants taught in multi grade classrooms in villages located in various regions of Turkey in the past and are presently teaching in single grade classes in central İzmir. This is a qualitative research which allows the in-dept investigation of phenomena in their own natural environment in a holistic manner (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2016). Phenomenological approach was chosen for this research. Phenomenological design focuses on phenomena which we are aware of, but have no in-dept understanding. Phenomena occur in different forms in our daily lives, and they are live experiences, perceptions, concepts and cases that we constantly experience. Even though we are familiar with them that does not necessarily mean we understand them deeply (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016).

Although all multi grade classes are offered in the rural parts of Turkey, not all rural primary schools offer multi grade classes. As Acar (2020) stated, schools in those locations have different dynamics. We can learn about the number of students, their grades, the cost of education per student from the statistics, nevertheless, the physical conditions of these schools and the geographical characteristics of the region, its culture and other dynamics create dramatic differences in the ways these schools operate. Therefore, implementation of phenomenological design is thought to reveal the detailed opinions of the teachers who taught in multi grade classrooms better than any other design.

### Study Group

Twenty participants (11 females and 9 males) participated in the study. Their ages vary between 37 and 58. Four of them have associate degree, 15 of them have undergraduate degree, and 1 of them have PhD. degree. All of them work in state schools. All participants taught in multi grade classes in the past and are teaching in single grade classes in primary schools in central İzmir presently. The total number of teachers who taught in multi grade classes in Turkey is unknown. Therefore, the snowballing technique was implemented to determine the participants. The

snowballing technique allows the researchers to choose the participants after the research has started. The participants recommended the researchers to recruit other teachers who taught in multi grade classes. This research was conducted by chain referral, asking each participant to lead us to another colleague who taught in multi grade classes until twenty participants agreed to provide the data during the 2019-2020 school year. The data was collected by following the participants and the critical situations (Creswell, 2013).

## **Data Collection Tools**

The data was collected through in-dept, semi-structured interviews during which 7 questions were asked. Semi-structured interviews allow researchers to receive both fixed answers and provide the researcher the ability with going deep down in investigation (Büyüköztürk, Kılıç-Çakmak, Akgün, Akdeniz & Demirel, 2018). A question form was prepared by the researchers based on the literature review. Expert opinions regarding the question form were gathered from four instructors teaching at the Department of Educational Administration, Buca Faculty of Education at Dokuz Eylul University. In addition, two primary school teachers who taught in multi grade classes in the past, as well one Turkish Language teacher gave their expert opinions to provide the content validity and correct language usage. Based on their opinions, the questions were reorganized, and a pilot study was conducted. The revised questions were asked to four teachers in order to check if they are understood correctly during the pilot study. As a result, it was understood that the questions were clear, and only minor changes were made.

The participants were asked questions such as “In your opinion, what are the advantages of multi grade classes for students? Why?”. In addition, teachers’ metaphorical descriptions regarding the multi grade classes were asked. They were asked questions such as “teaching in multi grade classes is like....., because.....”. The teachers were asked to name the first metaphors that come to mind regarding teaching in multi grade classes and they explained the reasons why.

## **Data Collection**

The data was collected during the first semester of the 2019-2020 school year. It took three weeks to interview all participants. The places, dates and times of the interviews were agreed upon with each participant. Twelve of the participants were interviewed in quiet places in schools such as the administrators’ rooms or guidance counselors’ rooms one-on-one. Eight of the participants preferred meeting outside their schools. Therefore, four of the participants were interviewed in a quiet coffee shop, and the other four were interviewed via Zoom. Prior to the interviews, the participants were informed that their names would not be revealed, and their views would only be used for this research. The permission to record the interviews was granted by the participants, and seventeen of them were recorded. The other three participants did not want to be recorded; therefore, notes were taken. The duration of the interviews varied between 90 minutes to 110 minutes. Their answers were transcribed and typed, then e-mailed to them for confirmation. Some minor revisions were made upon their request, and the document was finalized.

## **Data Analysis**

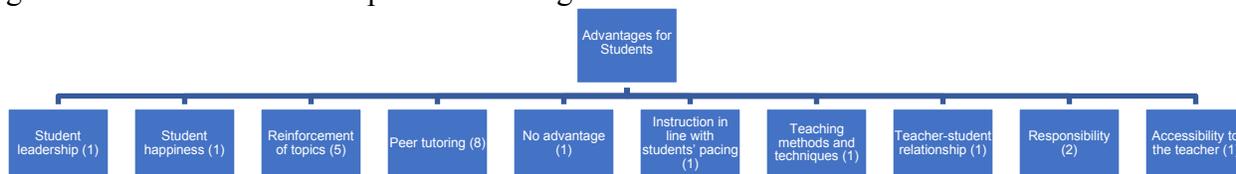
The data was analyzed via content analysis method. Content analysis is a technique in which certain characteristics of a message is objectively and systematically analyzed (Büyüköztürk et al., 2018). The interview questions were used as an umbrella, and the answers were then coded, and categories were established. All lists of code and the data from the interviews were loaded to “MAXQDA-18”, a software used to manage and evaluate data, and analyzed in terms of frequency and percentage. However, percentage analysis was not presented in this article because the number of participants was small. Exact quotations were also presented in the findings.

## Findings

This section presents the findings of the study in the order of research questions. The participants’ comments are included.

### The Advantages of Multi Grade Classes for Students

The analysis of the answers given by the teachers concerning the advantages of multi grade classes for students is presented in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** The evaluation of the advantages of multi grade classes for students

Eight participants think that multi grade instruction benefits students in terms of peer tutoring the most. Out of eight, one teacher stated “*Older students always help the younger ones, and students from different ages can learn from each other.*”

Five teachers are of the opinion that multi grade classes enable students to review and reinforce previous topics which constitutes an advantage. One teacher observed that “*The teacher goes over the topics repeatedly in different groups, students then have an opportunity to repeat topics that they did not fully understand or learn before.*”

In addition, one teacher indicated that students in multi grade classrooms can be instructed in line with their individual pacing. Academically advanced students in lower grades will be able to listen to instruction given in the higher grade and improve themselves. The teacher’s response which was coded under “instruction in line with students’ pacing” is presented below:

“*Multi grade classrooms are always an advantage for lower grades because students attending the lower grade will have a chance to listen to instruction given in the higher grade. As a result of this, students who have a high level of cognitive development will improve.*”

Two teachers think that students in multi grade classes gain responsibility, ability to fulfill a task by themselves, and leadership skills during their study times. One teacher’s response to what was coded under “responsibility” is presented below:

*“Multi grade classrooms enable students to gain skills to fulfill a task by themselves. Students gain responsibility and finish their assignments during assignment sessions”.*

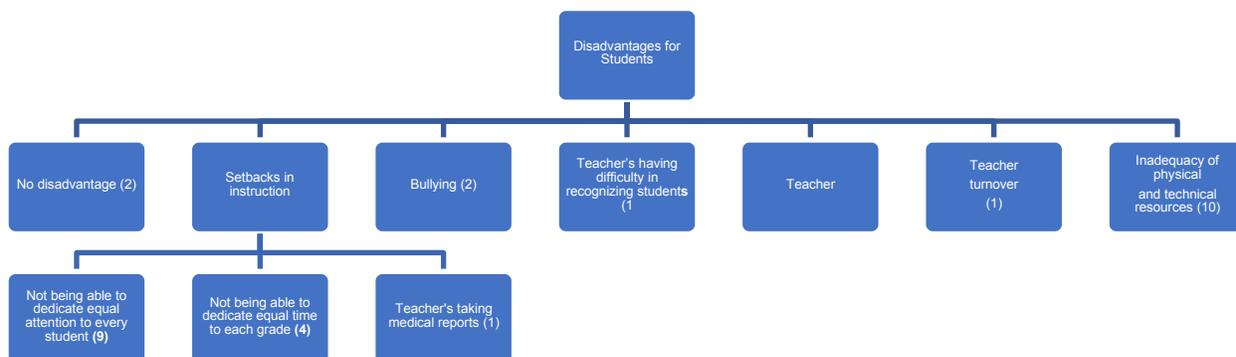
One teacher’s response in terms of “student leadership” is provided below:

*“[Older students’] lead each other and affect the younger ones positively, and their peer solidarity facilitate the teacher’s job in class, and enables students gain some positive behaviors [positive student behaviors] quicker.*

One teacher claims that students in multi grade classes have easier access to the teacher, and another teacher observes that students come to the school happily. They do not have concerns about transportation as their school is near to their homes. A third teacher states that having to create their own material due to insufficient resources, fosters their creativity. Three of the teachers believe that multi grade classes offer no advantages to students.

### The Disadvantages of Multi Grade Classes for Students

The analysis of the answers given by the participants regarding the disadvantages of multi grade classes for students is presented in Figure 2.



**Figure 2.** The evaluation of the disadvantages of multi grade classes for students

Ten of the teachers stated that insufficient physical and technical resources in multi grade classes constitute a disadvantage for students. Three teachers’ opinions are presented below:

*“The resources to find information is limited.”*

*“Students cannot be provided with much other than basic objectives because of insufficient resources and the absence of physical infrastructure.”*

*“Insufficient educational materials and the absence of technological resources prevent students’ self-development.”*

As disadvantages of multigrade classes, fourteen teachers declared not being able to dedicate equal attention to every student, not being able to dedicate equal time to each grade and teacher’s having a day of absence for health reasons when no substitute teacher is available. One

teacher’s opinions which were coded under “not being able to dedicate equal attention to each student” are presented below:

*“Students cannot actively spend the whole class time with the teacher during the actual 6 hours of instruction, because there are dedicated hours for assignments during these six hours, and there is more than one grade to teach. The teacher cannot pay equal attention to each student.”*

Another teacher’s opinions concerning “not being able to dedicate equal time to each grade” are given below:

*“If you are teaching both the first and the second grades the second graders are not paid much attention because one has to pay more attention to the first graders.”*

Views regarding “teacher’s having a day of absence for health reasons” and “teacher turnover” are given below:

*“As a result of teachers’ not willing to work in these regions [less developed regions] for a long time there is a frequent turnover rate, and teachers are taking frequent leaves of absence for health reasons.”*

Two teachers stated that students may have to deal with bullying in multi grade classes. One teacher said *“Older students may bully the younger ones.”*

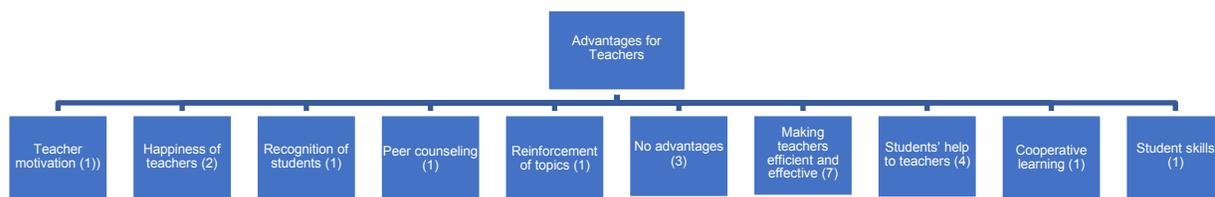
In addition, another disadvantage is teachers’ having difficulty in recognizing students. One teacher’s opinions regarding this topic are presented below:

*“All students do not have a chance to express themselves, because teachers are busy with teaching everything in the curricula, they have difficulty in recognizing children’s personal characteristics.”*

Two of the teachers stated that they think there are no disadvantages of multi grade classes for students.

## The Advantages of Multi Grade Classes for Teachers

The analysis of the answers given by the teachers regarding the advantages of multi grade classes for teachers is presented in Figure 3.



**Figure 3.** The evaluation of the advantages of multi grade classes for teachers

Most of the participants (7 people) found multi grade classes gave them an opportunity to be more efficient and effective teachers. Two of the teachers’ opinions are below:

*“The teacher will have to become more creative and productive. I prepared my own materials.”*

*“The teacher stays up-to-date in terms of professional knowledge because the teacher has to know the curricula of all grades. If there are subjects which students do not understand and cannot learn it becomes easier for the teacher to go back to [these] subjects.”*

Also, teachers (4 people) think receiving students’ aid is an advantage. One participant’s opinions, coded under “help to teachers” are given below:

*“I think it is advantageous for teachers who are just starting their career. Older students in upper grades assist younger students in their assignments and help the teacher. In addition, students start school ready in terms of self-care. Students’ hand improvement also becomes better, and this facilitates the teacher’s job.”*

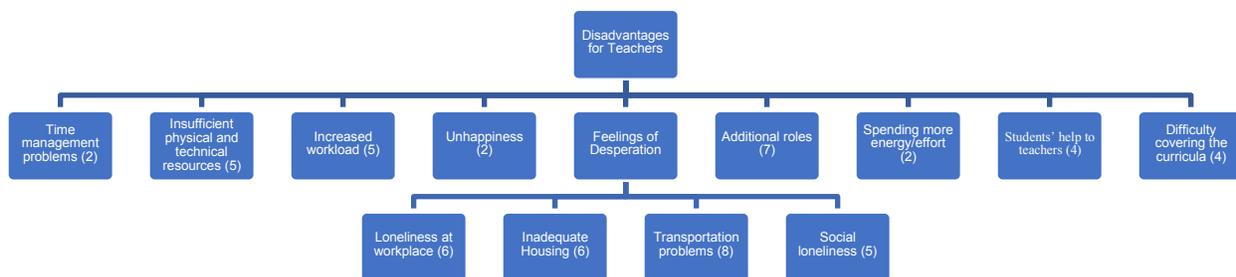
One of the teachers said working at schools which employ multi grade classes contributes to teachers’ working comfortably. The teacher’s answer which was coded under “teacher’s happiness” is as follows:

*“Teachers are able to pay attention to students individually because the number of students in the classroom is not high. Levels of all students can be observed simultaneously. There is room for teacher’s autonomy. Since outside inspection is limited I was able to relax and be more productive. In fact, I was not dealing with the procedures and losing time.”*

One of the teachers believed students’ psychomotor skills in multi grade classes developed more than those who are in single grade classes. Another teacher believed students in higher grades had a chance to listen to topics taught in lower grades again and had a chance to compensate for any missing knowledge. In addition, one teacher thought students’ willingness to learn more increased the teacher’s motivation. Three of the teachers, on the other hand, did not think multi grade classes offer any advantages.

### The Disadvantages of Multi Grade Classes for Teachers

The analysis of the answers given by the participants regarding the disadvantages of multi grade classes for teachers is presented in Figure 4.



## **Figure 4.** The evaluation of the disadvantages of multi grade classes for teachers

Teachers' opinions regarding disadvantages of the multi grade classes for teachers are as follows: Transportation problems (8 people), additional roles (7 people), inadequate housing (6 people), insufficient heating (3 people), loneliness at workplace (6 people), social loneliness (5 people), increased workload (5 people), time management problems (2 people), insufficient physical and technical resources (5 people), difficulty covering the whole curricula (4 people), failure to develop professional competence (2 people), teachers' spending more energy/effort (2 people).

Some teachers also work as the principals of their schools in addition to their teaching positions in multi grade classes, and this creates extra workload. Two statements are given below:

*“Working both as a principle and a teacher makes us undergo additional workload”*

*“Teachers are given additional and unwanted workload such as working as a principal authorized teacher. When the village we teach is far away, and we are at home and a communication channel does not exist official papers cannot be received. This creates psychological pressure.”*

Most of the participants declared that the resources in the village and at their schools are insufficient. Two of the teachers' statements are given below:

*“[Teachers] have to struggle with many problems such as transportation and accommodation, and these problems lower their performance, and has a negative effect on their psychology.”*

*“Teachers are left alone to struggle with many problems such as transportation and accommodation. Teachers are expected to be supermen and create wonders under bad conditions.”*

Some teachers think working in a village with only two or three other teachers creates social loneliness. Their opinions are given below:

*“Starting the profession in a multi grade class makes it difficult for the teacher. Teachers feel social loneliness.”*

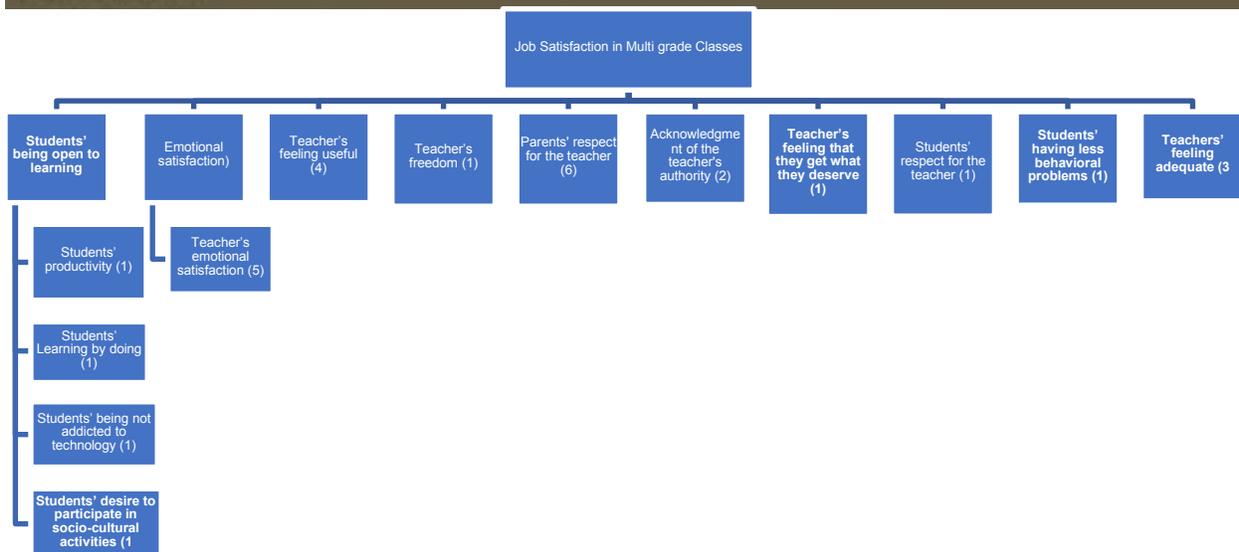
*“Engaging in more than one grade tires the teacher more. Time management problems arise. People become lonely, and if you are lucky to have another teacher at your school the second teacher becomes your whole life.”*

Five teachers complained about inadequacy of physical and technical resources. Some of their views are presented below:

*“The shortage of educational materials and teaching equipment necessitates the teacher to create everything from scratch. The teacher attempts to solve every problem on his/her own.”*

### **Teachers' Job Satisfaction Level from Multi Grade Classes**

The analysis of the answers given by the teachers regarding their job satisfaction level teaching in multi grade classes is presented in Figure 5.



**Figure 5.** The evaluation of teachers’ job satisfaction levels teaching in multi grade classes

As Figure 5 depicts, teachers have more job satisfaction when teaching in multi grade classes. Their greatest satisfaction comes from “parents’ respect for teachers (6 people)”, “the emotional closeness (5 people)”, “students’ being open to learning (4 people)”, “teachers’ feeling useful (4 people)” and “teachers’ feeling adequate (3 people)”. Most of the participants said they felt useful and efficient while teaching in multi grade classes. One participant’s statements are given below:

*“The villagers valued me a lot. We shared a lot with them. Students were very respectful. The students were not addicted to technology, and they were learning while participating and doing things. They were productive. They were willingly participating in socio-cultural activities. Because of all these reasons, teaching a multi grade class made me feel more important and efficient.”*

Some participants stated that parents in the village respected the teacher and the profession of teaching, and this increased their motivation. One statement is given below:

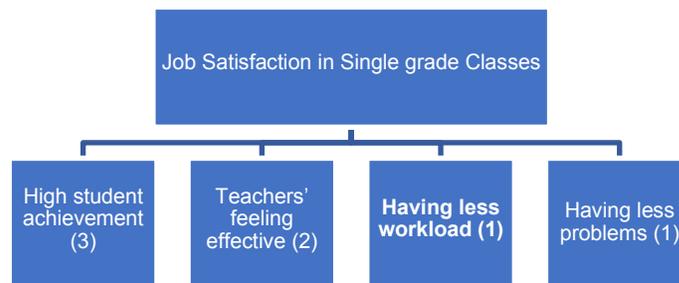
*“Teacher means everything in a village; therefore, teacher is viewed as a leader and a guide by both students and their parents. Both students and their parents are loyal to the teacher. This motivated me in my life. In addition, when I found solutions to the villagers’ problems, I was able to become closer to them.”*

Another participant’s explanation regarding “emotional satisfaction” is presented below:

*“[When I was teaching in a village] teaching something new to students and becoming efficient for them became the meaning for my life, and my every achievement made me very happy. On the other hand, any negative situation caused me excessive unhappiness.”*

## Teachers’ Job Satisfaction Levels Teaching in Single Grade Classes

The analysis of the answers given by the teachers regarding their job satisfaction levels from single grade classes is presented in Figure 6.



**Figure 6.** The evaluation of teachers' job satisfaction levels from single grade classes

As Figure 6 depicts, seven participants claimed they have higher job satisfaction in single grade classes. Two of them felt more effective, three of them thought student success was higher, one of them thought there were less problems, and one of them thought there was less workload in a single grade class.

One of the teachers' opinions regarding "high student achievement" are presented below:

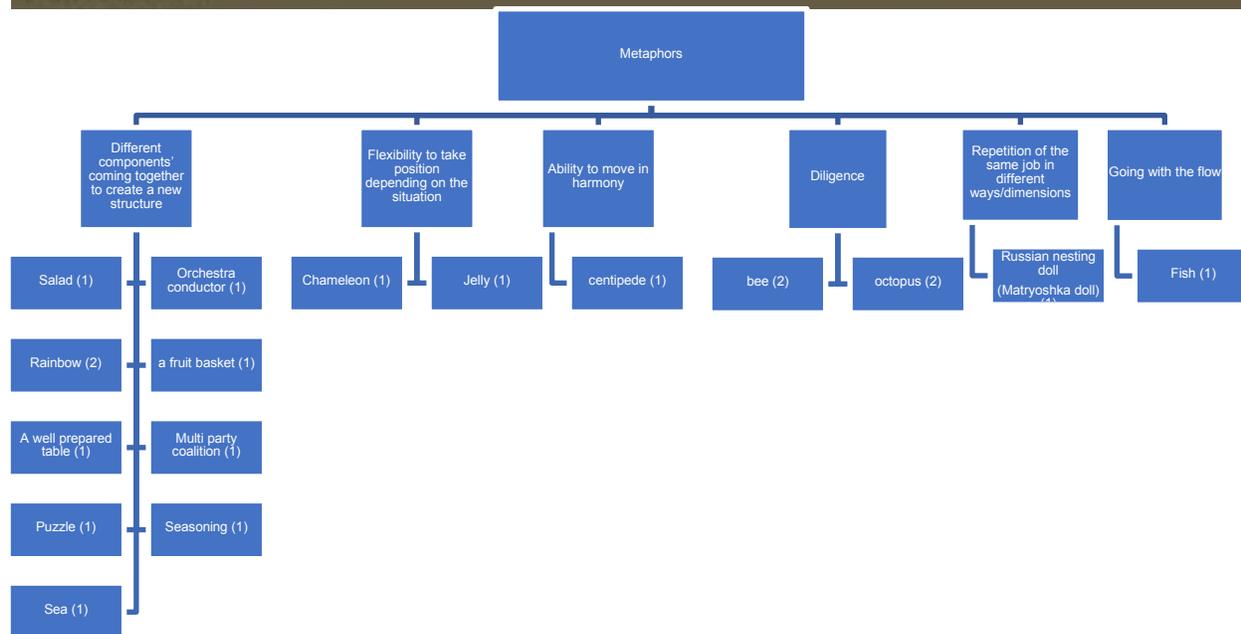
*"My job satisfaction is higher in single grade classes because student achievement is higher."*

The participant who thought the workload is lower in a single grade class said the following:

*"I wouldn't want to teach in multi grade classes again because places which employ multi grade education have difficult physical conditions, and it is easier to achieve aims and objectives in a single grade class."*

### **Metaphors Created by Teachers Regarding Teaching in Multi Grade Classes**

The analysis of the answers given by the teachers regarding metaphors for teaching in multi grade classes is presented in Figure 7.



**Figure 7. Metaphors created by teachers regarding teaching in multi grade classes**

As Figure 7 depicts, there are six categories of metaphors created by the participants regarding teaching in multi grade classes. These are as follows: “different components’ coming together to create a new structure (f=11)”, “diligence (f=4)”, “flexibility to take position depending on the situation (f=2)”, “ability to move in harmony (f=1)”, “repetition of the same job in different ways/dimensions (f=1)”, and “going with the flow (f=1)”. The following are the explanations of the participants concerning their metaphors.

The participants said teaching in multi grade classes is like a rainbow, the sea, a fruit basket, multi-party coalition, a well-prepared table, a salad, seasoning, a puzzle and orchestra

conductor. All was coded under the category of “different components’ coming together to create a new structure”. One participant’s explanation concerning why he/she used the rainbow metaphor is given below:

*“It is like a rainbow. Because students with different readiness and with different characteristics come together to form a beautiful entity just like a rainbow in which different colors come together to form a beautiful structure.”*

One participant’s usage of the sea metaphor for teaching in a multi grade class is: *“It is like the sea. There is diversity in the sea, and similar to sea life, students have different characteristics and needs in multigrade classes”*. The use of seasoning as a metaphor: *“It is like a meal prepared with many spices. The meal tastes better than the one prepared with only one seasoning when different seasonings are used. Students with very different characteristics create richness.”* The puzzle was also used as a metaphor. Emphasizing students’ learning from each other, one teacher gave the following statement: *“It is like completing a puzzle. Because students from different grades make peer tutoring and complete each other’s learning like completing a puzzle.”* One participant’s explanation why she/he used the “orchestra conductor” metaphor: *“It is like being an orchestra conductor. Because the teacher should make the students from different grades progress in their own ways according to their own capacity synchronously.”*

In the “diligence” category the participants used “bee” and “octopus” metaphors. One participant’s opinion concerning the usage of the “bee” metaphor is given below:  
*“I said bee because a teacher must be diligent like a bee.”*

Another participant used the “octopus” metaphor:

*“It is like an octopus. Because teachers must work in multi dimensions in different levels similar to the arms of an octopus.”*

Placed in the ‘flexibility to take position depending on the situation category’, ‘chameleon’ and ‘jelly’ metaphors were used. An explanation of the chameleon metaphor is; *“Teachers in multigrade classes must find practical solutions under the given circumstances similar to chameleons’ adapting their environment immediately.”* Another teacher explained why s/he used the “jelly” metaphor:

*“It is like jelly. Jelly is flexible and can take the required form in a short time. The teacher must also act quickly and focus on solutions.”*

One teacher used the “centipede” metaphor, categorized under “ability to move in harmony”, and explained his/her reasoning like this:

*“It is like a centipede. Similar to a centipede’s every foot’s moving in harmony students from different skill sets and levels continue receiving instruction in harmony.”*

In addition, coded under the “repetition of the same job in different ways/dimensions” category, the “Russian nesting dolls” metaphor was used. One participant’s explanation is presented below:

*“It is like Russian nesting dolls. Because the teacher has to repeat the same task in different ways/dimensions.”*

“One teacher used the “fish” metaphor in “going with the flow” category and gave this explanation:

*“It is like a fish which swims in the direction of the current. Because the teacher must act in accordance with the flow of the lesson.”*

## Discussion and Conclusion

The participants of this phenomenological study indicated the following advantages of multi grade classes; a) easy access to teacher b) happiness of students c) students’ chance to develop student leadership d) instruction suitable to students’ cognitive levels e) closeness of teacher-student relationship f) students’ chance to receive peer tutoring g) facilitation of reinforcement of subjects h) fostering and improving students’ responsibility taking skills i) teachers’ feeling of being professionally more effective and adequate. The findings concerning the advantages of multi grade classes are similar to the findings of Akbaşlı and Pilten (1999), Şahin (2003), Köklü (2000) and Köksal (2003).

Two main points, “students’ chance to develop student leadership” and “fostering and improving students’ responsibility taking skills” were suggested by the participants as the advantages of multi grade instruction. These points are also the main objectives of schools in Japan that employ Confucianism. Students constitute study groups in multi grade classes during their study hours in Japan, and student leaders emerge among them. Leader student or students guide the group in completing the tasks, in other words, they share the responsibility with the teacher. Reid’s book (2006) “*Confucius Lives Next Door*” suggested Japanese people thought that teaching in classes in which there were not enough students might be disadvantageous. Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology states crowded classes in which group studies can be conducted teach students how to tolerate differences and conduct group work with different people. If an primary school teacher cannot come to work one day, the class president teaches the lessons instead of another teacher or the principal of the school. The teacher next door only stops by to see if everything is under control in the class. In other words, students gain the responsibility of studying by themselves. In alternative schools such as Summerhill and Waldorf, which have many practical examples in the world, compared to mainstream schools, the role of teacher is to raise self-sufficient individuals by providing more extended guidance and counseling to students (Murray, 2013).

The participants emphasized “inadequacy of physical and technical resources”, “not being able to dedicate equal attention to every student”, and “not being able to dedicate equal time to each grade” more than the other disadvantages. Similar to these findings, Erdem, Kamacı and Aydemir (2005), Summak, Summak & Gelebek (2011) and Elma (2013) also revealed the limited resources of schools and inadequacy of teaching materials as disadvantages of multi grade classes. The participants emphasized “not being able to dedicate equal attention to every student” and “inadequacy of physical and technical resources” with more frequency. All these disadvantages may also apply to single grade classes. The teachers’ view of “not being able to dedicate equal attention to every student” as a disadvantage while teaching a heterogeneous class may be

explained with small classes with homogenous students are easier to provide quality education and to manage. Therefore, they are preferred more. In fact, many students with different characteristics, viewpoints and developmental stages in a multi grade class may provide richness, and this can be turned into an advantage.

The teachers stated that teaching in multi grade classes makes them feel effective and useful. They can recognize students because the classes are not crowded. The teachers also receive students' help, and they become happy. The teachers' feeling "effective and useful" and receiving "students' help" may be evaluated as the advantages of multi grade class teaching. And yet "teachers' happiness" and "recognizing students" may result from living in a village and may not be directly related to multi grade practice. The teachers' happiness results from the parents' respect and humble attitudes which restricts them from interfering with teachers' decisions in class management. Similarly, the teachers are able to recognize their students and their parents etc. because they all live in a small village. Therefore "recognition of students" is related with village life.

The participants mostly identified transportation problems, accommodation problems, social and professional isolation as the disadvantages of teaching in multi grade classes. The problems they cite result from difficult conditions of village life rather than multi grade class teaching. Similarly, Yerlikaya (2000), Şahin (2003), Gözler (2009), Palavan and Göçer'in (2017) also indicated teachers' not being able to fulfill their basic needs such as transportation etc. as well as their loneliness caused their negative opinions regarding multi grade teaching. In addition, in this research, the teachers evaluated that the increased workload is a problem of teaching in multi grade classes. Working as "principal authorized teacher" was given as a major cause of work overload. Adem and Topal (2020) in their research titled "*Principal authorized teachers' opinions regarding working as principle authorized teacher*" revealed that the teachers focused mostly on the negative aspects of this application. The principal authorized teacher participants also stated, a problem in administration, teaching processes or students affects the other aspects negatively.

The majority of the participants think their job satisfaction is higher when teaching in multi grade classes. This may result from their management of students of various ages, readiness and experience levels. Their feeling of efficiency and effectiveness may result from their use of creativity and various skills because they are responsible for fulfilling many tasks in their schools. On the other hand, a smaller number of participants think their job satisfaction is higher while teaching in single grade classes. The satisfaction may result from the teachers' having enough time to prepare the classes and materials and the ability to pay close attention to each student. In addition, they are able to teach everything in the curriculum in a timely manner in single grade classes.

Furthermore, the participants created 16 metaphors placed in 6 categories concerning teaching in multi grade classes. 9 of the metaphors were placed in "different components' coming together to create a new structure", 2 under "flexibility to take position depending on the situation", 1 under "ability to move in harmony", 4 under "diligence", 1 under "repetition of the same job in different ways/dimensions", and 1 under "going with the flow". One metaphor was not enough to

explain teachers' opinions of working in multi grade classes, therefore teachers created 6 categories.

Most of the participants created metaphors regarding “different components’ coming together to create a new structure” category, and they preferred using “rainbow, well prepared table, bee and octopus” metaphors. It is possible that teachers view multi grade classes as the center of diversity, and that diversity brings richness in multi grade classes. Eker and Sicak (2016) also investigated metaphors regarding multi grade classes created by primary school teachers. They found that teachers created metaphors like “flower garden, rainbow, pencil case and galaxy” which may also suggest that teachers think students of various age groups and various characteristics create richness in multi grade classes. Similarly, İter (2015) revealed that teacher candidates used metaphors like “flower garden, tales, a rich menu, juice prepared with mixed fruits, rainbow, salad with mixed vegetables, mall etc.” to represent multi grade classes which may indicate that they view multi grade classes as the center of differences. In addition, Yener and Atalay’s (2018) study also depicted teacher candidates created metaphors like “a meal prepared with mixed vegetables, rainbow and a flower bouquet”. This also suggests a multi grade class is considered as a whole which is comprised of parts.

The teachers also created “chameleon, jelly, centipede, Russian nesting dolls and fish” metaphors. These metaphors may indicate that teachers think teaching in a multi grade class is where they need to be flexible, adaptive and work in harmony with the others. Kalman and Gül (2021) stated that teachers who work in villages used metaphors regarding working in villages that emphasize multi-tasking and finding practical solutions to the situations they deal with.

## Suggestions

Teachers who taught in multi grade classes in the past and presently teaching in single grade classes cited several advantages of multi grade education for both teachers and students with limited disadvantages for students. However, they stated this system is disadvantageous for teachers in many ways and gave examples like transportation, accommodation, heating, workplace loneliness and social loneliness. The problems stated by the participants result mostly from working in remote, rural villages that present difficult living and working conditions. Working as a “principal authorized teacher” in addition to teaching a multi grade class contributed to the problems. None of these problems stems from teaching in multi grade classes but they are directly related with living conditions of villages. In addition, the majority of participants think that their job satisfaction level is higher when teaching in multi grade classes. Furthermore, the metaphors the participants created, and their reasoning reflect positive opinions of multi grade teaching. All of these indicate that the bias concerning the multi grade classes in Turkey was not justified. Therefore, this negative point view needs to be changed. This research also revealed that detailed discussions regarding multi grade education are necessary, and this system should be a pedagogical preference rather than a necessity. The suggestions based on the results of this research are presented below:

1. Resources for schools which employ multi grade classes should be improved. Teaching materials should be provided, and the schools should become inviting for both teachers and students.

2. Multi grade classroom models of countries that provide high quality teaching practices may be studied and adapted into the Turkish educational system.
3. Better accommodations, transportation and heating opportunities should be provided for the teachers who teach multi grade classes in rural regions.
4. Teachers should not be appointed as “principal authorized teacher”. Teachers should work as teachers, and principals should work as principals.
5. Experts, practitioners, and authorities from the National Ministry of Education should come together in conferences, workshops etc. to discuss how to improve the negative sides of multi grade education, how to better the practice and to learn about good examples abroad.
6. The curriculum offered by Faculties of Education should include comprehensive topics on multi grade education to train teachers adequately for multi grade teaching.
7. Teaching practices in multi grade classes should be provided for at least one semester for teacher candidates.
8. Studies can be conducted to investigate the views of students who studied both in multi grade and single grade classes regarding the advantages and disadvantages of multi grade classes. Additionally, topics like students’ feelings etc. can be investigated to enrich empirical data.

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