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TEACHING PRACTICES IN MULTI-GRADE CLASSES – BENEFITS OF USING CLIL AND PEER TUTORING METHODS WITH DIFFERENT STUDENT GROUP FORMATIONS

Abstract: Young learners in multi-grade classes are of different ages, grade levels and language learning aptitudes. The very term *multi-grade* implies teaching two or more grades simultaneously. The problem that this study tackles is how students are taught in multi-grade classrooms and what are the consequences of mixing different year groups. It deals with the curriculum characteristics in multi-grade classes with the particular emphasis on the use of CLIL method and peer tutoring in teaching young learners. According to the results of the study, two main strategies were identified: practices that (1) aim to reduce students’ heterogeneity or (2) benefit from students’ heterogeneity. The participants of the study were both English language teachers and teachers of other subjects working with young learners in multi-grade classes. This article describes the teaching strategies used in multi-grade classes in four small rural primary schools in central Serbia on the basis of the content analysis of the interpreted teachers’ interviews. The results illustrate how differently multi-grade teaching can be achieved and how it can effectively support individual student’s learning. The findings are discussed with regard to teacher education intending to increase the awareness of the professional skills required in high-quality teaching practices in multi-grade teaching and indicate possible benefits of using CLIL by English language teachers with older students (third and fourth graders) and the positive effects of peer tutoring on younger learners. This study concludes by suggesting the effective teaching strategies based on the use of CLIL and peer tutoring for improving foreign language teaching in multi-grade classrooms.

Keywords: multi-grade classroom, mixed-age young learner classes, CLIL, peer tutoring, heterogeneity.

1. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF MULTI-GRADE CLASSES

This article addresses the issue of teaching in multi-grade classes by reporting an investigation into the teaching strategies used by teachers of such classes in rural

primary schools. In different countries, multi-grade class structure is known by various names such as *composite* or *combination classes*, *double classes*, *split classes*, *mixed-age classes*, *vertically grouped classes*, *multiple classes*, *family classes* or *multi-level classes* (Wilkinson, Hamilton 2023; Cameron 2009; Cornish 2006). The concept of multi-grade classes is generally present in rural areas, where the number of students indicates different working conditions. Namely, due to a smaller number of students per grade in rural schools, there is a necessity for grouping students into one class. Therefore, there are usually two or more grades in one class. For instance, there can be a few first graders, a few second graders, a few third graders and a few fourth graders within the same group/class. In terms of different grades, students are also of different ages. Mixed-aged classes indicate different working conditions since the curricula cannot be the same for all the grades. Moreover, this kind of work is highly demanding due to the fact that one teacher needs to work with two or more grades simultaneously. The contributions in the edited volume on multi-grade teaching based on the “Second International Multi-grade Teaching Conference” show that multi-grade teaching is common throughout the world, in both developed and developing countries (Cornish 2006a). They highlight the importance of rural school studies focusing on teachers’ effectiveness in their educational work while dealing simultaneously with a variety of multi-aged pupils of different educational levels and needs.

Accordingly, teachers’ responsibilities are highly demanding in the sense of training for multi-grade teaching with adequate resources in order to meet the challenging tasks and hold positive attitudes to multi-grade teaching. Regarding the discussions about maintaining or closing small rural schools in *International Journal of Educational Research*, pedagogical arguments have often been neglected, which is the main reason for our interest in how teachers actually teach their multi-grade classes (Kvalsund, Hargreaves 2009). It has been claimed that multi-grade teaching has certain benefits, including student-centered learning and teaching, flexible teaching, a family-like and secure atmosphere, the ease of implementing innovative change, support for individual learning tempos, and flexible school-entry (e.g., Kalaoja, Pietarinen 2009). Nevertheless, multi-grade teaching can also be perceived as particularly challenging because of the generally varying needs of mixed-aged children. Despite its widespread presence in primary education, there has been a lack of research on the practices used in multi-grade teaching.

This article seeks to focus on this gap. The key research question “How can students in differently mixed grades benefit from being taught by CLIL (in English language classes) and peer tutoring methods?” emphasizes the micro-level of school pedagogy aiming at observing the learning and teaching possibilities and resources that are supported or accessible in multi-grade classrooms. The study is based on empirical data consisting of narrative interviews of teachers from four different rural primary schools in four large villages in central Serbia. These four schools have a long tradition of multi-grade teaching thus the author of the article

found them compatible to reveal differences as well as similar patterns of multi-grade teaching practices.

To understand education in multi-grade teaching, the definitions of multi-grade teaching proposed by Trnavac (1992), Rajcevic (2014), Radevic (2008) are used as a theoretical framework for Serbian multi-grade classes. Moreover, various world studies support the international theoretical framework (Little 2001; Hoffman 2003; Heinzel 2007; Naparan, Alinsug 2021). Based on the research results, the author will additionally discuss how multi-grade teaching challenges teacher education, as all four schools seem to have insufficiencies with respect to professional training for teaching multi-grade classes. The author will also consider whether the teaching practices used in multi-grade classes can be regarded as universal methods of dealing with heterogeneity and diversity.

2. PREVIOUS RESEARCH AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

There has been little research on teaching and learning in small rural schools in Serbia over the last two decades, and information on the incidence of multi-grade teaching is difficult to find (Vukovic 1951). Rajčević (2014: 43) points out two criteria for forming multi-grade classes: “1. Students’ number in certain grades, 2. Good curriculum organization as a criterion”. According to the preferences of age-homogeneity, the number of students and educational background, it is highly advisable to merge similar grades, 1st and 2nd or 3rd and 4th grade. In this case, the curricula of two grades (1st and 2nd or 3rd and 4th) are quite similar and naturally the lessons are repeated from the previous grade thus for teachers it is easier to organize the classes (Rajčević 2014). On the other hand, some theories suggest it is better to follow the model of combining 1st and 3rd grade or 2nd and 4th, since organizing the classes needs to be done by using direct-indirect teaching methods (2014). The specific working conditions apparently focus on adapting teaching materials and timetable so that it could meet the students’ needs in the best possible way. By the current law and regulations, the limit of students in a multi-grade class of two grades should not exceed 20 students, whereas in a class of three or four grades the maximum number is 15 (Trnavac 1992). The reality of teaching in multi-grade classes has always been a theory without the practice, meaning that teachers get only formal education about the concept of multi-grade classes without an opportunity to practice multi-grade teaching in the course of their initial teacher education.

On the other hand, Little (2001) argues that most research studies on multi-grade teaching have focused on its impact on students’ learning. The discussion of multi-grade teaching has often addressed the question of whether students’ learning results are better in single-grade classes or in multi-grade classes, but studies have generally not found significant differences between these two forms (e.g., Veenman

1995; Åberg-Bengtsson 2009; Lindström, Lindahl 2011). According to Hoffman (2003), around the year 2000, the increased awareness of multi-age education as a child-centered strategy began to arouse interest in the practice throughout the United States as well as in many other countries. For example, in the Central-European German-speaking research area, multi-grade teaching has been investigated in recent years, especially from the point of view of school reform. The practice has been seen as a possibility to optimize the phase of school beginning, as multi-grade teaching enables flexible school entry and does not “dramatize” developmental differences between children (Heinzel 2007: 38). Multi-grade classes may also reduce the problems associated with grade repetition for students who have not met achievement objectives.

The study conducted in the East district of Tukuran, Zamboanga del Sur, Philippines, suggests that the “best classroom strategies in multi-grade classrooms of two grades should be: Classroom Management, Collaborative Learning, Using Differentiated Instruction, Connecting the Teaching to Real-life Situations, Integrating Technology in Teaching, and the flexibility of the Teacher” (Naparan, Alinsug 2021: 1). Following the principle of different multi-grade classrooms’ constitution, teachers need to decide upon the most suitable strategy. Collaborative learning is the efficient one if there are more advanced students who can take the role of the *Facilitator* in order to help their classmates (2021). Furthermore, teachers need to be flexible in order to meet students’ demands and combine several strategies simultaneously.

Radevic (2008) argues that the advantages of teaching in multi-grade classrooms are numerous. Tendency for adapting the curriculum according to students’ individual needs leads towards the development of students’ potentials and skills, thus each student advances accordingly (2008). In that way, students can develop their individual skills and creativity and senior students can help junior ones. On the other hand, teachers switch their roles from knowledge conveyor in one grade class to an organizer and adviser in order to develop student-centered classrooms (2008). The use of direct-indirect teaching introduces dynamics in the curriculum, so the students learn how to be engaged most frequently. Consequently, this research is targeted at investigating the strategies used to cope with diversity aiming at contributing to individual student learning.

3. TEACHING ENGLISH LANGUAGE BY INTRODUCING CLIL METHOD WITH YOUNG LEARNERS

The term ‘CLIL’ which stands for ‘Content and Language Integrated Learning’ was first mentioned in 1994 by David Marsh and Anne Maljers (Anderson, McDougald, Medina 2015). It could incorporate a wide range of situations connected to “the experience of learning non-language subjects through a foreign lan-

guage” (Marsh 2012: 28). As Brown (2006: 91) notes, there are a *multitude of reasons* why children may have difficulty acquiring a second language, including complex personal, social, cultural and political factors. Language acquisition is always influenced by various factors and perhaps the most influential one could be of socio-cultural nature. Naturally, some students have better pronunciation and some are faster than the others because their cognitive skills differ immensely. Moreover, a heterogenic class indicates different levels of language acquisition. In addition to this, CLIL approach is a useful tool for overcoming the possible inconveniences in language acquisition. Marsh (2000) argues that CLIL offers YLs more realistic and natural opportunities to learn and use an additional language in such a way that they soon forget about learning the language as such and focus only on learning the content. Innovations in this approach refer to the fact that contents are not extracted from everyday life but from subjects such as Maths, Geography, Biology and other school subjects (Wolff 2003).

CLIL method links learning process with practical language application, which coincides with students’ experiences and interests leading them to higher motivation in the learning process. This method aims at creating more natural conditions for learning the language and using it in the classroom (communication in the classroom), fostering students to focus on the meaning in the learning process (Dalton-Puffer 2007). In that sense, CLIL is not a new form of teaching foreign languages and non-language subjects but innovative integration of these two aspects of teaching. As Šefer (2002) claims, the interdisciplinary approach offers a possibility for comprising different aspects of problems leading to the development of more flexible meaning.

In order for CLIL to be successfully implemented, teachers need to be well trained so that this approach could have practical application. First of all, teachers need to understand the stages of students’ cognitive development. Furthermore, young learners are not able to understand the cause and effect intellectually before they reach the concrete-operational stage, which is between 7 and 11 years of age. In that period, they learn how to think logically and learn to understand the cause and effect (for instance, if it is raining outside, PE class will be held in the gym). In addition to this, CLIL approach is more suitable for older students who have their cognitive skills already developed (Marsh 2012). When introducing CLIL to young learners, teachers need to focus on learners’ needs and provide them with key terms and structures related to the CLIL subject. Teachers are advised to start with easier terms and then gradually increase them through games (such as “Simon says”), miming, guessing and using flashcards (Ioannou-Georgiou 2015). As learners grow older and develop their reading skills, posters with key language are useful tool in classrooms (2015).

In recent years, formal and informal CLIL teacher training programs have been developed by numerous institutions (schools, universities, publishing houses) which helped raise teachers’ interest in this field. Moreover, schools provided suit-

able environment opportunities for implementing CLIL method in classroom. As an innovative approach to teaching, CLIL method helps teachers in growing professionally, in expanding their knowledge and skills and in motivating YLs to focus on learning the cross-curricular content (Savić, Cekić-Jovanović, Shin 2020). Additionally, YLs like new ways of teaching and they should be encouraged by teachers in developing independence, having subject-centered focus, taking part in group activities, using drawings, models, action figures, painting, realia, and relate it to their experience (Santrock 2005). In CLIL method, teaching materials and teaching techniques should be in accordance with the subject's syllabus, with a particular attention to differentiating the materials in order to maintain students' motivation and achieve learning objectives. Additionally, learners gradually develop confidence in understanding subject content and actively participate in classes.

4. THE ROLE OF PEER TUTORING AND PEER GROUP WORK IN MULTI-GRADE CLASSES

The influence of older students to younger ones in multi-grade classes is immense. There are different ways how older graders can assist younger ones and one of them is peer tutoring. It's a strategy where students teach students in a way that more capable students assist less capable ones (Kalaoja 2006; Cornish 2006b). Peer tutoring can be used for explaining school routines, activating students' participation, demonstrating for effective learning and for giving drill exercises to reinforce the concept (Kalaoja 2006; Cornish 2006b). Older students will feel important in assisting their fellow friends and above all they will help the teachers reduce the workload. Moreover, this strategy emphasizes individual learning and students' cooperation. Students who have a tendency for being peer tutors can be selected by other students or by the teachers. Those are usually high achievers and students with good accomplishments in different subjects. Nevertheless, the teacher's role is still relevant no matter how capable peer tutors might be. Teachers need to monitor students' progress and assist when students feel uncomfortable with unpredictable situations.

On the other hand, peer group work implies grouping cheerful, average or weaker students together either in the same grade or in different grades. Students in peer groups teach one another, and like in regular groups, some students who advance more easily assist the slower ones in a particular subject or activity. The peer group needs to have a leader of the group whose role is assigned on rotation (Kalaoja 2006; Cornish 2006b). Students cooperation is of high relevance and it greatly helps students in performing various tasks and in making progress. According to Johnson (1994), the first major component contributing to the multi-grade classroom success is a family-like atmosphere which reduces frequency of social isolation and encourages risk taking associated with meaningful learning. Kinsey

(2001) emphasized that the second component is the dynamic of the returning older students (with more educational experience) engaging in cross-age interactions in learning activities.

5. COLLECTING AND ANALYZING TEACHER NARRATIVES

Teacher interviews (n =34) were collected in four small Serbian rural schools in the period from December 2022 to April 2023. The four schools were selected due to the long tradition of multi-grade teaching. At the beginning an email enquiry was sent to the chosen schools. Having expressed their willingness to participate in the study, the school principals selected representative teachers who could take part in the study. These four schools, located in central Serbia, represent typical Serbian small rural schools: they are situated in the center of their small communities, not far from the church and the town hall (see Table 1). In all four schools, there are several multi-grade classes with several class teachers, with about 25–30 students from preschool to the 4th grade (children five to ten years old, see Table 2). All four schools have the so-called branch schools with smaller numbers of students in multi-grade classes with only two teachers per four classes. Moreover, in the most remote branch schools, classes are formed with all-grades students (1st to 4th). Consequently, one teacher teaches all the students in one class which intensifies both teaching and learning (see Table 2)

Table 1. Participants' gender, qualification and experience in multi-grade classes in four schools

School	Participants' Gender		Participants' Qualification		Participants' Professional Experience in Multi-grade Classes	
	Female	Male	English Language Teacher	Teacher of Other Subjects	Years of experience	Number of teachers
S1	5	2	2	6	0–5	6
S2	5	2	2	6	5–10	10
S3	8	1	3	7	10–15	6
S4	7	4	2	9	15–20	7
					Over 20	5

Table 2. Learners’ age in different multi-grade classes and teachers in different group formations

School	Learners’ age				Student group formations		
	No. of students in 1 st and 3 rd grades	No. of students in 2 nd and 4 th grades	No. of students in 1 st and 2 nd grades	No. of students in 3 rd and 4 th grades	Student group of four grades	Number of teachers working with two grades	Number of teachers working with four grades
S1	4	8	16	3	4	5	2
S2	5	6	18	7	5	5	2
S3	11	8	13	10	5	7	2
S4	13	10	11	12	6	7	4

Two of the schools, S1 and S2, were chosen as representatives of “typical” small schools, with three different multi-grade teaching groups and one class teacher per every group. There are about 15 students from preschool to the 4th grade in every group in both schools (6–11 years old). Both schools are located about 15 km from the center of the municipality and have four branch schools. All teachers come from neighboring villages or towns. On the other hand, the other two schools, S3 and S4, have different models of organizing multi-grade groups. Unlike the previously described ones, these two schools are in larger areas with branch schools in more remote areas. The multi-grade groups in branch schools are differently formed with more students in one multi-grade group (all four grades). The data from teacher interviews (n = 15) were collected during three school visits of 3–5 days. Teachers were interviewed during a school day and were also observed in their classrooms for one lesson. In the classroom visits, the focus was on the following aspects: the arrangement of the classroom, the teaching material, the grouping of students, teachers’ utilization of time and how they shifted between different groups and stages, and students’ peer interactions. In this article, the author uses only the data from teacher interviews to answer the research question. However, there is a perception that the observation data have improved understanding of the teaching practices described by the teachers.

The duration of the interviews ranged between 25 and 40 min, depending on whether they were conducted orally or in written forms. In this article, the collected data are referred to as pseudonymized. The code S1T = the pseudonym denotes a teacher in school 1; the code S2T a teacher in school 2, whereas codes S3T and S4T stand for teachers in schools 3 and 4. The data consist of 34 interviews with class teachers: five female S1 teachers and five female S2 teachers, two male S1 teachers and two male S2 teachers, eight female S3 teachers and one male S3 teacher, and seven female S4 teachers and four male S4 teachers. Six teachers in all four schools can be considered as beginners: at the time of data collection, they were working as teachers for the first time, having graduated 1–3 years before (see Table 1). Huberman (1989) calls this stage of a teacher’s career the stage of coping or

finding, where it is important to “survive” in the classroom. Ten teachers were in the stage of stabilizing (Huberman 1989) in their teaching careers, having teaching experience of 4–7 years. Five teachers began their teaching careers at the beginning of the 1990s; they were in the stage of experimentation and active development (Huberman 1989). On the basis of their almost twenty years of teaching, they can be considered experienced teachers who have taught for about thirty years.

With the use of the narrative approach (Riessman 2008), the author examined personal work and experience of teachers through their narratives. During the interviews, teachers were asked to explain how they had begun their careers and to describe their work in their small schools and multi-grade classes. They were also asked to evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of multi-grade teaching and the use of the CLIL method (English language teachers only) and peer-tutoring in their teaching. In English classes, third graders frequently have practice in using various tools (scissors, glue, recycling materials such as cardboard boxes, cardboard tubes, plastic bottles) and following the instructions (cut, stick, etc.) for making toys from recycled materials. In that way, they improve their craft skills and learn about recycling. On the other hand, fourth graders create a town map by drawing a map of their town with all the places they learnt in classes. They practice how to read a map and give directions, as well as how to help a foreigner get around in their towns. The interviews were conducted orally, by asking questions, and by filling in Google docs for the teachers working in the remote branch schools; the theory supported analysis was based on the method of content analysis (Neuendorf 2002; Riessman 2008). The author began by reading the teacher narratives and differentiating sections in which teachers described their various teaching practices and principles with teaching situations from their own classes (Riessman 2008). The sections were then organized under different themes and sub-themes using the matching topics by means of CLIL method. The following three main categories were identified: (1) formation of students’ groups and organizing teaching different subjects, (2) teaching with CLIL method (English language teachers only) and (3) peer tutoring. In the following paragraphs, these main categories and sub-categories are described in more detail. First two categories, formation of students’ groups and organizing teaching different subjects, along with teaching with CLIL method, are primarily based on the definitions of multi-grade practices proposed by Kalaoja (2006) and Cornish (2006b):

- *parallel curriculum*: students share the same themes or subjects but following the syllabus of their grade; each grade is taught in turn;
- *curriculum rotation*: the entire class follows the curriculum of one grade for one year; in the next school year, they follow the syllabus of the other grade; grades are taught together;
- *curriculum alignment and spiral curriculum*: similar topics are identified in different grade curricula; students share the same themes or subjects; the basic

concepts that are taught in the lower grades are deepened and expanded on in the upper grades;

- *subject stagger*: each grade studies a different subject; each grade is taught in turn;
- *whole-class teaching*: grades are taught the same subject at the same time and use the same material.

As noted above, all these definitions implicate student grouping as the key point in organizing teaching in a multi-grade class. The data for the third main category of peer tutoring were further divided into the following two sub-categories: spontaneous peer tutoring, and guided peer tutoring as a teaching strategy. The English language teachers in this study stressed the significance of using the CLIL method in teaching multi-grade classes. In the following section, the research results are presented based on the categories described above, along with examples from the teacher interviews.

6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The teaching practices in the multi-grade classes in this study varied frequently and were linked to teacher personality, subjects, and teaching situations. Therefore, identifying the most common practice is not possible and any strategy that was used by more than one teacher in all four schools is reported as unsubstantial.

6.1. FORMATION OF STUDENTS' GROUPS AND USING CLIL METHOD

Based on the data, there are some common practices in multi-grade classes in all four schools. The school subjects such as P.E., Religious education, Music and Art were taught as whole-class teaching, using the same teaching material for all grades. Experienced English language teachers also used the whole-class teaching method for some topics (Christmas, New Year, Easter) and they implemented CLIL method with themes from Science, Serbian Language and Mathematics, whereas other teachers implemented *curriculum alignment and spiral curriculum* (see Table 3).

For example, in a Science lesson in a multi-grade class with grades 3 and 4, students share the same themes within the same subject, whereas the basic concepts that are taught in the third grade are deepened and expanded in the fourth grade. This kind of organization may cause difficulties for students who begin to study Science with the material for the fourth grade, as S4 English language teachers noted. In such situations, the teacher needs to recognize knowledge gaps that may hinder students' understanding of the subject, as the teaching material in text-

Table 3. Sub-themes and frequency of using them in multi-grade classes in four schools

Sub-themes	Frequency of using in S1	Frequency of using in S2	Frequency of using in S3	Frequency of using in S4
Parallel curriculum	5	6	5	6
Subject stagger	1	1	2	1
Whole-class teaching	7	7	9	11
Curriculum alignment and spiral curriculum	2	3	3	2
Peer tutoring	7	7	9	11
CLIL method	2	2	3	2

books is arranged in an inductive or hierarchical manner (scaffolding is a desirable method for bridging the possible difficulties).

The leading practice in teaching Mathematics and Serbian Language in all four schools was the parallel curriculum, meaning that both grades are taught the same subject but have different assignments. While the teacher is explaining a new task to one grade, the other grade is working silently on assignments adjusted to their group level. Most teachers found mathematics and language to be the most challenging subjects. Because these subjects are considered to be important, it can be expected that teachers are under pressure to teach them well. The challenge of parallel curricula is to keep all students engaged, especially those who are working silently. Both beginners and experienced teachers agree on this statement. Nevertheless, using a parallel curriculum may lead to more disruptive behavior from students who become frustrated due to boredom, lack of independent work skills, and the need to wait for the teacher’s guidance (Cornish 2006b).

Some teachers noted that there is always waiting time, often “wasted time” for one group, when the teacher is introducing a new content to the other group. Teacher S1T3 referred in particular to the first- and second-graders and described the independent initiative of third- and fourth-graders in such situations: “Third- and fourth-graders are already pretty independent and simply work ahead.” Older teachers in this study taught Mathematics and Serbian using the subject-stagger technique (teaching two different subjects simultaneously), justifying this approach with the belief that it is easier to study Mathematics independently. The S1 teachers in this study described their efforts to use curriculum alignment instead of parallel curricula by searching for common topics for different grades, thus in line with the ideas of spiral curriculum. For example, S1T2 said that she has analyzed the curricula and textbooks for both grades (grades 3 and 4) in her class, looking for common topics in English. If she does not find one, she develops it herself. Overall, she finds the benefits of teaching English by linking it to other subjects and integrating different learning goals and themes. In that sense CLIL method links similar topics from different subjects and enables students to make connections.

Furthermore, students forget about learning the language as such and focus only on learning the content (see Table 3).

6.2. PEER TUTORING

According to Cornish (2006b), peer tutoring is common in multi-grade classrooms. In this study, two forms were identified by the teachers. Spontaneous peer tutoring occurs when children help one another voluntarily (2006b). On the other hand, peer tutoring as a reaction to the teacher's guidance is called guided peer tutoring (2006b). The teachers in all four schools described their students as helpful and cooperative; they often referred to situations in which upper-grade students spontaneously helped the younger ones, regarding this help-giving as very important: "Older students learn how to mix gently with the younger students, always supporting and helping them, and I find this particularly charming and valuable" (S4T4). Lower-grade students obviously benefit from the help of upper-grade students (see Table 3).

Nevertheless, spontaneous cross-grade help is not guaranteed. Teachers working with all four grades had not noticed any spontaneous helping between students of different grades in most classes, but they did observe helping among students of the same grade, for example, a student helping a classmate who had asked for assistance. Teacher S1T5, who works in a remote branch school added that in "individual work" phases during the lesson, the students do help other students across the grades: "When they share the same content or when they have an individual work period, they do some things together and help each other more frequently". This statement indicates that cross-age helping requires a specific learning environment that can be developed through a reduction of teacher control of the learning situation (as in free work) or through teacher structuring (such as cross-age grouping).

Teachers in all four schools used guided peer tutoring as a teaching strategy, but their motives were different. S4T2 asks children who are "high achievers" to tell other students about their special interests. S2T2 uses peer tutoring as an "extra exercise" where students who have completed their tasks may help the others. S3T1 has tested peer tutoring in her class by explicitly encouraging upper grade students (fourth grade) to teach the lower grade students (second grade). She supposes that there are many more possibilities of using peer grouping in teaching. S1T4 said that, in addition to asking the upper-grade students (grade four) to help the younger ones (grade three), she sometimes mixes grades for certain tasks.

7. CONCLUSIONS

This study aimed at investigating educational practices in multi-grade classes in order to obtain a deeper understanding of learning and teaching possibilities in such settings. As data, the author used oral interviews and Google docs responses collected from 34 teachers from four small primary schools in central Serbia. The schools were chosen due to their similarities in terms of multi-grade teaching traditions and school size and their differences in approaches with regard to teacher educational experience. The research results reveal that in all four schools diverse teaching practices are used in multi-grade classes. Two main strategies can be identified. One strategy involves overcoming the heterogeneity of students as much as possible through teaching practices such as parallel curricula, curriculum alignment, and whole-class teaching. In such practices, the teacher either teaches one heterogeneous group, with the same teaching content and assignments for all students, or works with one age homogeneous group while the other group (or groups) works silently on their own assignments.

With different approaches different practices are used, benefiting from the heterogeneity of students but also reducing teaching demands, such as peer tutoring, personal work plans, or individual work. These techniques are regarded as optimal didactical solutions for multi-grade teaching for several reasons: they are based on the idea that heterogeneity is typical; they focus on student's individual needs instead of groups; they support peer learning and foster cognitive as well as social development; and they emphasize individual learning processes and goals as sampling criteria rather than group aspects such as age or grade. Moreover, the data reveal teachers' desire to organize their teaching in a practical way with different teaching groups and integration of various subjects. Teachers also tend to support different learners through forms of differentiation and individualized learning guides such as work plans or differentiated assignments.

As mentioned above, it is impossible to identify a most common practice in multi-grade teaching according to this study. A similar result has been found in earlier studies (Little 2001; Lindström, Lindahl 2011). One reason for the heterogeneous variety of practices could be the lack of multi-grade teaching options in textbooks and curricula, as well as in teacher education (Little 2001). Thus, the teachers in this study have developed their personal teaching styles primarily in practical situations in their own classes or with the help of their colleagues. According to the results, the problem has been noticed in terms of a gap between theory and practice, thus arousing doubts regarding the effectiveness of teacher education in general and suggesting that new and promising views of learning and teaching could better help schools (Korthagen 2010).

In addition to teaching practices that support individual work on the part of students, the author suggests that whole-group practices are needed to strengthen the social interconnection of the students and to support the cooperation of students

of different grades. One possibility for such a practice is the spiral curriculum, not only because of its social advantages but also because of its potential to activate and utilize the readiness and range of knowledge of different types of learners. As Bruner's (2006) hermeneutical theories highlight, this method can range from intuitive to more formal structures. The results of this research indicate that curriculum alignment using the spiral curriculum was not prevalent in the described teaching practices. However, one cannot realistically expect individual teachers to adapt the available teaching material for that purpose, in addition to all their other work (Little 2001). Thus, it is necessary to investigate the ideas underlying the spiral curriculum and how they can be integrated into the level of core curricula. This would potentially inspire textbook authors and other actors to produce new teaching materials and tasks based on the concept of the spiral curriculum.

There are some shortcomings of this study. Firstly, the sample size was small, and the teachers were from a very specific group, namely teachers in small rural schools at the primary school level. Based on the research findings, there cannot be assumption that their teaching practices are representative for multi-grade classes generally. Moreover, further research needs to develop understanding of high-quality teaching practices in multi-grade classes that can be linked to empirical research findings on teaching such as clear structure, individual learning support, formative feedback, adaptive teaching, or professional classroom management (Hattie 2009). Secondly, the study is limited to the teachers' perspectives, therefore it would be desirable to relate teaching practices to students' learning in multi-grade classes. For example, the social advantages of peer tutoring for students seem to be obvious, but more knowledge is needed with regard to how these practices support learning and help students construct knowledge together with their peers (see e.g. Parr, Townsend 2002). In addition, the flexible grouping strategies used in multi-age classes may be an effective way to meet the instructional needs of students and encourage their collaborative work (Hoffman 2002).

Despite the shortcomings of this research, the results identified certain challenges in teacher education. Thus far, teachers have only been slightly – if at all – prepared for multi-grade teaching. Therefore, it is suggested that teacher educators and researchers should become more aware of high-quality teaching practices in multi-grade teaching, such as professional use of individual work plans, peer tutoring or spiral curriculum. Such practices demand optimal planning and instruction on the part of teachers and require that students receive individual feedback and learning support. Good multi-grade teaching practices are supposed to serve single-grade classes equally well, since every class is characterized by heterogeneity (e.g. with regard to age, gender, interests, aptitudes, and experiences).

In addition to CLIL method in multi-grade classes, there is often a misconception of using CLIL with very young learners which is actually just a form of good practice. As Coyle, Hood and Marsh emphasize, "it is difficult to make a difference between CLIL and standard activities with young learners that include

singing, playing, drawing and building models” (2010: 17). Nevertheless, CLIL is a model of a good practice and to which extent it could be used in teaching it is up to a teacher to decide according to both learners’ abilities and other factors.

Deeper knowledge would not only enhance our understanding of good practices in multi-grade teaching, but would also help teachers choose and develop teaching practices that contribute to and optimize students’ learning in their heterogeneous classes.

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КУРИКУЛУМ У КОМБИНОВАНИМ ОДЕЉЕЊИМА РАЗРЕДНЕ НАСТАВЕ – ПРЕДНОСТИ УПОТРЕБЕ CLIL МЕТОДЕ И ВРШЊАЧКОГ МЕНТОРСТВА

Резиме: Ученици млађих разреда у комбинованим одељењима разликују се по узрасту, разредима и способностима. Сам термин *комбиновано одељење* укључује наставу у два или више разреда истовремено. Проблем којим се ова студија бави односи се на питање како ученици уче у комбинованим одељењима и које су последице мешања различитих узраста. Студија се бави карактеристикама курикулума у комбинованим одељењима са посебним акцентом на употребу CLIL методе и вршњачког менторства у настави ученика млађих разреда. Истраживање је спроведено у руралним основним школама, у различито комбинованим одељењима, при чему је близу 30 ученика квантитативно тестирано путем иницијалног и финалног теста на тему хране и играчака. Резултати указују на предности употребе CLIL методе у раду са старијим ученицима (трећим и четвртим разредом) и на позитивне ефекте вршњачког менторства са млађим ученицима. У наставку, ова студија потврђује да је сличност у наставном плану релевантна, стога обезбеђује и практичне препоруке

за комбиновање разреда са сличним курикулумом (први и други или трећи и четврти разред). Закључак ове студије је нагласак на задовољавању потреба ученика у комбинованим одељењима на што квалитетнији начин и могућностима за што интересантнијом и продуктивнијом наставом употребом CLIL методе и вршњачког менторства.

Кључне речи: комбиновано одељење, ученици нижих разреда различитог узраста, CLIL, вршњачко менторство, хетерогеност.