



Multigrade Classes as a Pedagogical Necessity in Rural Türkiye: Turkish Teaching Processes, Problems, and Solutions

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ABSTRACT

The principle of equal opportunity in education mandates access to quality educational services for every individual, regardless of geographical and demographic barriers. Multigrade classes, a historical and sociological reality of the Turkish education system, play a vital role in ensuring this access, particularly in rural areas. This research aims to examine the processes of teaching Turkish in multigrade classes, the structural and pedagogical difficulties encountered, teacher perceptions, and student achievement levels through a holistic approach, in light of academic studies conducted between 2010 and 2024. Designed with a qualitative meta-synthesis method, distinct from action research patterns, this study deeply analyzes existing literature to reach a thematic synthesis. The research findings reveal that Turkish teaching in multigrade classes is deeply shaken not only by physical impossibilities but also by the inflexible structure of curricula, inadequacies in teachers' pre-service training, and the dilemma of "independent study" versus "teacher-led" lesson hours. In particular, the incompatibilities created by the Sound-Based Sentence Method (SBSM)—used in initial literacy teaching—with the dynamics of multigrade classes constitute one of the report's most striking findings. The study concludes with concrete, data-driven recommendations for policymakers and practitioners.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 16 November 2025; Accepted 09 December 2025

KEYWORDS multigrade classes, Turkish teaching, rural education

Introduction

Although the multigrade class practice is often perceived in modern education systems as a temporary solution or an undesirable necessity, it constitutes the starting point of educational life for millions of students globally and specifically in Türkiye. Defined in the literature as "students of more than one grade level receiving education in the same classroom under the supervision of a single teacher" (Dursun, 2006; Yılmaz, Yüksel, & Çoban, 2024), this model is strictly tied to Türkiye's demographic structure, scattered settlement characteristics, and the phenomenon of rural-to-urban migration. Multigrade classes are not merely an administrative measure providing economic savings, but also a pedagogical tool for rural development and social integration. However, the functionality of this tool is directly related to the quality of the education provided. The Turkish course, which forms the basis of the educational program and holds the key to all other disciplines, is of critical importance in this context. Disruptions in Turkish teaching directly affect not only the student's language development but also mathematical reasoning, science literacy, and social skills (Coşkun, 2018).

Historical and Current Status of Multigrade Classes

In Türkiye, the multigrade class practice has been one of the cornerstones of the literacy mobilization since the early years of the Republic. This practice, whose pedagogical framework was officially drawn in the 1968 primary school curriculum, became identified with the "village teacher" model originating from the Village Institutes

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tradition (Dursun, 2006). However, changing education policies over time, bussed education practices, and the extension of compulsory education to 8 years in 1997 (and later to 12 years with the 4+4+4 system) have affected the status and prevalence of multigrade classes.

When Ministry of National Education (MoNE) data and union reports are examined, it is observed that multigrade classes maintain their presence despite alternatives such as bussed education and Regional Boarding Primary Schools (YİBO). According to 2021 data, approximately 6,200 of the 25,576 primary schools in Türkiye—that is, one in every four schools—implement multigrade classes (MoNE, 2021; Yılmaz et al., 2024). Some reports emphasize that this rate is even higher in rural regions and constitutes a significant percentage of the total number of primary schools (Dursun, 2006; Kılıç & Abay, 2009). These statistics prove that the reality of multigrade classes is a "process to be managed" rather than a "problem to be eliminated." Suggestions to close village schools or switch to bussed education (Dursun, 2006) are not always feasible considering geographical difficulties and the endurance of young age groups for long journeys. Therefore, increasing the quality of existing schools must become a priority policy goal.

Strategic Importance and Problem Status of Turkish Teaching

Turkish teaching in multigrade classes possesses dynamics that radically differ from monograde classes. While a teacher in a monograde class can focus all attention and time on a single level and a single subject (e.g., teaching literacy to 1st graders), this luxury does not exist in a multigrade class. The teacher must try to make 1st graders sense the "e" sound, while simultaneously checking the reading comprehension text of 3rd graders and the grammar rules of 4th graders. This fragmented structure causes division of instructional time, distraction, and difficulties in classroom management (Coşkun, 2018).

By nature, the Turkish lesson is based on interaction, reading aloud, listening, and speaking. However, the risk of "noise" and "disturbing one another," which is the biggest handicap of multigrade classes, threatens the efficiency of the Turkish lesson. It is almost impossible for upper-grade students, expected to work silently during independent study hours, not to be affected by lower-grade students reading aloud during teacher-led hours (Sınmaz, 2009). Additionally, it is debatable how suitable the constructivist curriculum implemented in 2005 and subsequent updates are for the heterogeneous structure of multigrade classes. The "student-centered" structure of the curriculum highlights the teacher's guidance role; however, in a multigrade class, the teacher is forced to act as a "coordinator" rather than a guide due to time constraints (Dursun, 2006; Kılıç & Abay, 2009).

This study aims to address the current state of Turkish teaching in multigrade classes, the problems experienced, and potential solutions with academic depth within the framework of the problem status summarized above. The fundamental questions of the research are as follows:

- What are the structural and physical factors affecting the Turkish teaching process in multigrade classes?
- What kind of pedagogical difficulties do the methods used in the initial literacy teaching process (especially the Sound-Based Sentence Method) create in the multigrade classroom environment?
- How do teachers structure "independent study" and "teacher-led" hours in the management of the Turkish lesson, and what strategies do they use in this process?
- How are student achievement and reading comprehension skills affected by the multigrade class structure?

Method

In this research, a Qualitative Meta-Synthesis design was adopted to comprehensively examine and synthesize studies addressing the subject of Turkish teaching in multigrade classes. Meta-synthesis is a research method that brings together findings of qualitative studies conducted in a specific field, reinterpreting these findings, deepening them, and enabling new inferences. Unlike action research or a simple literature review, meta-synthesis aims to reveal the big picture not visible in singular studies by distilling the "essence" of existing works.

Data Sources and Selection Criteria

A comprehensive scan was conducted in the Council of Higher Education (YÖK) Thesis Center, DergiPark, Google Scholar, ERIC, and Tr Dizin databases to create the study's data set. During the scanning process, keywords such as "birleştirilmiş sınıf" (multigrade class/classroom), "Türkçe öğretimi" (Turkish teaching), "ilk okuma yazma"

(initial literacy), "kırsal eğitim" (rural education), and "köy öğretmeni" (village teacher) were used in Turkish and English (Coşkun, 2018; Yılmaz et al., 2024).

The following criteria were based on the selection of studies included in the analysis:

- Time Range: Published between 2010-2024 (In terms of reflecting current curriculum changes and sociological transformations).
- Scope: Focusing on multigrade class practices in Türkiye or presenting a comparative perspective (e.g., the France example; Gülden, Akıncı, & Kaplan, 2023).
- Subject: Directly focusing on the Turkish lesson, literacy process, or language skills, or presenting specific data regarding Turkish teaching within general problems.
- Method: Articles, graduate theses, and institutional reports designed with qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods published in peer-reviewed journals.

In total, a wide pool of literature consisting of articles, theses, and reports addressing different dimensions of Turkish teaching in multigrade classes (method, material, teacher perception, student achievement) was scanned, and the data presented in this report were distilled from this pool.

Analysis and Synthesis of Data

The obtained data were processed using the **thematic analysis** method. Findings obtained from different researches were passed through a coding process and categorized according to their similarities and differences. For example, the code "lack of time" in one study and the code "inability to complete the program" in another study were combined under the theme of "Instructional Process and Planning Problems." In the analysis process, raw data obtained from the field (teacher and student views) and observation notes were prioritized over researchers' interpretations. This approach ensured that the report ceased to be merely a theoretical discussion and gained the quality of a document reflecting the voice of the field.

Findings

As a result of the systematic review and meta-synthesis, findings regarding Turkish teaching in multigrade classes were gathered under five main themes. These themes reveal the multi-dimensional structure of the problem.

Impact of Structural, Physical, and Material Limitations on Teaching

One of the most fundamental variables determining the quality of Turkish teaching in multigrade classes is the physical environment where teaching takes place and the materials possessed (or lacked). Research shows that the vast majority of these classes are located in socio-economically disadvantaged rural areas and experience serious equipment deficiencies.

Intervention of Physical Environment in Pedagogy:

Teachers complain about the insufficiency of basic physical conditions such as heating, lighting, and cleaning of the classroom in processes requiring mental focus like the Turkish lesson. A significant portion of multigrade class teachers spend part of the lesson hour lighting the stove, cleaning the classroom, or maintaining physical order (Ocakçı & Samancı, 2019). In a classroom heated by a stove, even the comfort difference between a student near the stove and one far away affects participation in the lesson. The "quiet and comfortable environment" necessary for listening and reading activities in the Turkish lesson cannot be provided due to physical impossibilities.

Seating Arrangement and Classroom Management:

Having more than one grade in the same space turns the seating arrangement into a strategic decision. Although it is seen in the literature that teachers generally prefer the "U-shape" or "cluster work" arrangement, it is stated that they are forced into the classic "row arrangement" when class sizes are crowded (Ocakçı & Samancı, 2019). The empty space required for activities such as drama, role-playing, or circle time in the Turkish lesson is often not found in narrow classrooms. Different grades using the board is also a problem; dividing the board into two or three weakens visual perception and causes students' attention to drift to the other grade's topic.

Insufficiency of Materials and Resources:

Turkish teaching requires a rich stimulating environment. A classroom library, level-appropriate reading books, visual materials, and technological tools (projectors, smart boards) are the foundation of this richness. However, research emphasizes that these materials, especially resources necessary for students' individual work (independent study hours), are extremely insufficient in multigrade classes (Dursun, 2006; Kılıç & Abay, 2009). The use of textbooks prepared for monograde classes in multigrade classes leads to content and duration incompatibility. For instance, the lack of modular sets specifically structured for multigrade classes, where the student can progress on their own without needing the teacher, is the biggest factor causing independent study hours to pass inefficiently.

Initial Literacy Teaching: Method, Process, and Conflict

The most critical, most problematic process that challenges the teacher the most in multigrade classes is undoubtedly the initial literacy teaching for 1st-grade students. The Sound-Based Sentence Method (SBSM), adopted in 2005 and revised in 2017, experiences serious incompatibilities with the nature of multigrade classes.

Table 1: Disadvantages of the Sound-Based Sentence Method in Multigrade Classes

Problem Area	Explanation and Effects
Lack of One-on-One Attention	SBSM requires the teacher to check whether every student produces the sound correctly. However, while the teacher gives sound to 1st graders, they must wait for other grades (2, 3, 4) to work silently. This divided attention leads to sounds being learned incorrectly or not being reinforced (Avcı & Şahin, 2016; Sinmaz, 2009).
Eye-Voice Coordination	The method requires intensive use of visual and auditory stimuli. However, the inability to present sounds in a digital environment due to technological inadequacies increases the teacher's burden.
Parental Support and Confusion	Parents in rural areas usually know the old "Sentence Method" or "Alphabet Method." Parents practicing at home by adding the "e" sound next to consonants (saying "buh" instead of "b") contradicts what the child learns at school (the "b" sound) and creates confusion (Avcı & Şahin, 2016).
Cursive Writing Trauma	<i>(Past period finding)</i> During the mandatory cursive writing period, multigrade class students could not find the opportunity to understand what they read due to dealing with the mechanics of writing. It is a common problem that students cannot read their own writing (Avcı & Şahin, 2016).

Reading Speed and Comprehension Problem:

Research shows that students learning literacy in multigrade classes have difficulty in blending sounds and passing the spelling stage. Avcı and Şahin's (2016) study revealed that all teachers think students are insufficient in reading comprehension and cannot read fluently. Teaching words by breaking them down (sound-syllable) in the sound-based method can delay holistic perception, which slows down the transition to meaningful reading. Especially, a student spelling incorrectly during "teacher-less" hours cannot be corrected instantly by the teacher, causing the error to become permanent (fossilization) (Avcı & Şahin, 2016).

Management of Independent Study and Teacher-Led Hours: A Pendulum Movement

The backbone of multigrade class management consists of the distinction between "Independent Study Hours" (the teacher attends to another group; the student works individually) and "Teacher-Led Hours" (the teacher actively lectures). The Turkish lesson is generally structured in the curriculum as a lesson that needs to be "teacher-led"; however, in practice, holding a separate 40-minute Turkish lesson for each grade in an environment where four grades are together is mathematically impossible.

The Perception of Independent Study Hours as "Free Period"

Teachers generally teach the Turkish lesson in blocks, assigning silent reading, summarizing, or worksheet filling tasks to other groups while working on reading aloud or grammar with one group. However, findings by Sınmaz (2009) and other researchers indicate that independent study hours are perceived by students as "free periods." Students in the independent study group listen to the lesson in the teacher-led group, get distracted, or start talking amongst themselves. This situation causes a constant hum in the classroom and destroys the listening discipline required by the Turkish lesson (Dursun, 2006).

Planning and Time Management

Teachers' biggest nightmare is the anxiety of "not finding enough time." Trying to impart the Turkish learning outcomes of four different grades in a 40-minute lesson turns the teacher into a "traffic cop." Although teachers try to combine topics while making lesson plans (e.g., covering the "National Holidays" theme for all grades), this is not always possible because the depth and difficulty level of learning outcomes differ between grades (Coşkun, 2018; Kılıç & Abay, 2009). Consequently, teachers usually tend to just "explain the topic and move on," unable to allocate time for in-depth analysis, discussion, and critical thinking activities.

Teacher Competence, Perception, and Metaphors

The most important actor determining the quality of education in multigrade classes is the teacher. However, due to the appointment system in Türkiye, newly graduated, inexperienced teachers who are strangers to rural life culture are generally appointed to this challenging duty.

Inadequacy of Faculties of Education

Teachers state that the "Teaching in Multigrade Classes" course taken during their undergraduate education remains theoretical, and internships are usually done in monograde classes in city centers. The teacher who graduates and is appointed to a village experiences a shock like a "fish out of water" (Dursun, 2006; Kılıç & Abay, 2009). Even if they know the Turkish teaching methodology, they do not have a practical repertoire on how to apply this to four different levels simultaneously.

Metaphorical Perceptions: Gardener or Warrior?

Metaphor studies examining teachers' perceptions of multigrade classes reveal the psychological process experienced. Teachers see themselves as;

- Gardener: A patient and caring person trying to grow different types of flowers (students) in the same garden (Arslan, 2013).
- Parent: A protective figure who not only teaches but also combs hair, lights the stove, and finds winter coats.
- Warrior: A person fighting against impossibilities, indifferent parents, and physical difficulties.
- Conductor: A person trying to manage different voices (grades) in harmony.

These metaphors show that the teacher's role shifts from "instruction" to "care and management." This role confusion weakens the teacher's academic focus and causes burnout (Yılmaz et al., 2024). The administrative burden brought by being a "Principal-Teacher" (official correspondence, fuel purchase, building maintenance) distracts the teacher from their main job, education.

Student Achievement: Contradictory Findings

There is an interesting dilemma in the literature regarding the success of multigrade class students in Turkish lessons.

Quantitative Data

Some researchers, such as Coşkun (2018), did not find a statistically significant difference between the reading comprehension skills of 1st-grade students studying in monograde and multigrade classes in measurements made with standard tests (Coşkun & Çetinkaya, 2018). This situation may indicate that the low class size of multigrade classes allows the teacher to deal with the student more individually (even for a short time) or the positive effects of "peer teaching" (older students helping younger ones).

Qualitative Views

In contrast, almost all studies based on teacher views and observations argue that multigrade class students are academically disadvantaged. Teachers state that students have a limited vocabulary, act shy in expressing themselves, and experience problems in using standard Turkish (Coşkun, 2018; Kılıç & Abay, 2009). especially in regions where local dialects are dominant, the inability to practice sufficient Turkish at school negatively affects language development. A study on bilingual multigrade classes in France also confirms that heterogeneous language levels make teaching difficult and slow down linguistic development (Gülden, Akıncı, & Kaplan, 2023).

Discussion

The findings obtained in this report show that the problems faced by Turkish teaching in multigrade classes are not "incidental" but "structural." The problem is not just the stove not burning or the lack of books, but the way the system is designed.

Rigidity of the Program and Incompatibility:

The current primary school curriculum is based on a linear progression assumption where grade levels are separated by sharp lines. However, the nature of the multigrade class is cyclical and intertwined. A 3rd-grade student can listen to the 2nd-grade Turkish lesson again or be introduced to advanced concepts by overhearing the 4th-grade lesson. Instead of using this "permeability" as an advantage, the current system drags the teacher into chaos by forcing them to deliver the outcomes of each grade separately and in isolation. The demand for a "flexible program specific to multigrade classes," frequently voiced in the literature (Dursun, 2006), is the clearest indicator of this incompatibility.

Unused Potential of Peer Teaching:

Multigrade classes are a natural laboratory for Vygotsky's "Zone of Proximal Development" (ZPD) theory. A more competent peer (upper grade) guiding a peer in need of support (lower grade) could be the system's strongest weapon. However, findings show that teachers use this potential pragmatically and unplanned, often as "making the upper-grade student a teacher's assistant so they don't stay idle," rather than as a conscious and systematic strategy. Controlled peer readings in Turkish lessons can transform this potential into efficiency.

Technology and Inequality of Opportunity:

The digital divide is deepening in rural education. While the importance of visual and auditory materials in Turkish teaching increases, the lack of technological infrastructure in multigrade classes reinforces inequality of opportunity. Despite the existence of digital platforms like EBA (Education Information Network), these resources cannot be used in village schools without internet access, and the teacher tries to implement the modern curriculum with a blackboard and chalk.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Due to Türkiye's geographical reality, multigrade classes will not disappear completely in the near future. Therefore, the strategy should be built on "improving" and "transforming" these schools, not "closing" or "ignoring" them. Turkish teaching must be at the center of this improvement, because success in other courses is not possible without acquiring language skills.

Policy and Program Level Recommendations

- **Flexible and Modular Turkish Program:** A spiral and modular curriculum should be prepared for multigrade classes where learning outcomes are structured according to skill levels (Level A, Level B, Level C) rather than grade levels (1, 2, 3, 4). In this way, the teacher can teach more efficiently by grouping students according to reading levels, not their ages.
- **Production of Special Materials for Independent Study Hours:** To increase the efficiency of independent study hours in multigrade classes, the MoNE should prepare and distribute "Individual Learning Materials" and sets with clear instructions and self-assessment opportunities, allowing the student to work independently without needing the teacher.

Teacher Training and Support Recommendations

- Applied Village Internship: Courses such as "Alternative Education Practices in Primary School" or "Teaching in Multigrade Classes" in faculties of education should be moved away from theory, and it should be made mandatory for teacher candidates to do an internship in a village school with multigrade classes for at least one semester.
- Positive Discrimination for Village Teachers: Financial incentives, service point advantages, and housing support should be provided to teachers working in these difficult conditions to increase their professional satisfaction. Additionally, the administrative burden of "Principal-Teachers" should be reduced, and stationery and bureaucratic procedures should be digitized or carried out from the district center to ensure the teacher focuses on the lesson.

School and Classroom Implementation Recommendations

- Technological Equipment Mobilization: Every multigrade class must be provided with internet access (satellite internet if necessary) and a projector/smart board. The use of digital content in sound-based literacy teaching will reduce the teacher's burden by half.
- Structured Peer Teaching: In-service training should be given to teachers on how to transform peer teaching into a scientific method. Systems where upper grades will act as "reading coaches" to lower grades (e.g., Reading Buddy hour) should be integrated into the curriculum in Turkish lessons.

Turkish teaching in multigrade classes is a strategic issue that cannot be left to the individual sacrifice of the teacher. Every improvement step taken in these schools will increase the chance of the country's most disadvantaged children holding on to life.

Disclosure statement

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Ethics statement

N/A.

Consent

N/A.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.


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Authors' Contributions

Mustafa Biber  Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft and Writing – review & editing.

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