RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Family Involvement in the Initial Literacy Process in Multigrade Classrooms

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**ABSTRACT**
Time constraints in multigrade classrooms render the family a mandatory stakeholder in the initial literacy process. This study aims to examine parents' experiences with the literacy process in multigrade classrooms and the pedagogical barriers they encounter. The research utilised a phenomenology design, one of the qualitative research methods; data were collected through semistructured interviews with parents whose children attended multigrade classes in rural Edirne and were analysed via content analysis. The findings indicate that parents lack knowledge of the "phonics-based sentence method", cause cognitive confusion in children through traditional methods, and fall short in their role as "assistant teachers" due to agricultural workloads. Consequently, the family's cultural capital and pedagogical equipment directly shape academic achievement in multigrade classrooms and deepen inequality of opportunity. The study recommends organising applied-method workshops for parents and disseminating digital support content.

## Introduction

The practice of multigrade classrooms, one of the most concrete and universal applications for ensuring equality of opportunity in education, is an educational reality not only in developing countries but also in developed nations with sparsely populated rural areas. Multigrade classrooms are defined as pedagogical environments in which pupils from more than one grade level continue their education in a single classroom under the supervision of a single teacher (Little, 2006). In Turkey, geographical conditions, migration, and the scattered nature of the population ensure that this practice persists as a structural component of the education system rather than a temporary solution (Dursun, 2006). The most fundamental characteristic of these classrooms is the division of the instructional process into "teacher-led instruction" and "independent study" (seatwork) hours. The necessity for the teacher to partition their time and energy among groups of varying cognitive levels renders classroom time management the most critical variable determining the quality of education (Yıldız & Köksal, 2009).

Within this complex pedagogical structure, the first-grade level and its primary acquisition, initial literacy teaching, hold particular significance. The initial literacy process is a critical period in which an individual's academic self-concept is shaped, mental skills are developed, and the foundations for future school success are laid (Akyol, 2019). However, in multigrade classrooms, while the teacher conducts lessons with upper grades (teacher-led instruction), first-grade pupils are generally left to their own devices within the scope of "independent study". The nature of initial literacy teaching, which requires immediate feedback correction, intense interaction, and modelling, conflicts with the physical division between the teacher and the learner. This situation necessitates the support of extracurricular factors, particularly the family, to fill the voids created during the instructional process.

When the literature is reviewed, the "overlapping spheres of influence model" developed by Epstein (2010) argues that student success can be maximised through the cooperation of schools, families, and communities. Particularly in multigrade classrooms in rural areas, family involvement is not merely a social activity but also an academic necessity. Research indicates that the support parents provide at home for their children's literacy process directly impacts phonological awareness, vocabulary development, and reading motivation (Senechal & LeFevre, 2002). Studies conducted in the Turkish context reveal that while parents in rural areas are willing to participate in the educational process, they experience problems regarding "how" to provide support due to a lack of pedagogical knowledge and methodological confusion, such as the traditional syllabic method instead of the phonics-based method (Summak et al., 2011).

Initial literacy teaching in multigrade classrooms is a multidimensional process that cannot be confined solely to school walls. Considering the teacher's time constraints and the heterogeneous structure of the class, parents assuming the role of an "assistant tutor" are strategically important for the healthy conduct of the process. However, the quality of this support is limited by parents' education level, socioeconomic status, and attitudes towards school. In this context, gaining a profound understanding of the experiences, difficulties encountered, and support mechanisms of parents educating their children in multigrade classrooms is essential for developing more effective school-family cooperation models.

## Method

This section provides detailed information on the research design, study group, data collection tools, data collection, and data analysis.

### Research Design

Since this study aims to examine parents' experiences of the initial literacy process in multigrade classrooms and the forms of family participation in this process in depth, a qualitative research approach was adopted. Qualitative research allows events and phenomena to be understood within their natural settings, through a holistic approach, and from participants' perspectives (Merriam, 2009). Phenomenology was chosen as the research design. The phenomenology design offers the most suitable ground for revealing the experiences individuals have regarding a phenomenon (in this study, "the literacy process in a multigrade classroom") and the meanings they attribute to these experiences (Creswell, 2013).

### Study Group

The study group consists of parents whose children were attending a village primary school with multigrade classroom practices affiliated with the Central District of Edirne Province during the 2024-2025 academic year. Criterion sampling, a purposive sampling method, was utilised to identify the participants. Criterion sampling involves studying cases that meet predetermined criteria (Patton, 2014). The fundamental criteria in this study were as follows: (1) the parent has a child as a first-grade student in a multigrade classroom or has recently completed this process, and (2) the parent provides active or passive support to the literacy process at home. In this context, interviews were conducted with participants who volunteered.

### Data Collection Tool and Process

A semistructured interview form developed by the researcher was used to collect the data. Semistructured interviews provide the researcher with a degree of flexibility, allowing the participant to delve deeper into the subject and enabling unexpected data to emerge (Kvale, 1996). While preparing the form, the relevant literature was reviewed, and draft questions were created. The 10-question draft form was presented to two academics specialising in educational sciences for their opinion and was revised in line with the feedback received to take its final form.

The data collection process was carried out during the autumn term of the 2024-2025 academic year. The interviews were conducted face-to-face in the participants' homes to ensure that they felt comfortable. Each interview was recorded with the participants' permission via a voice recorder and lasted an average of 40–60 minutes. The researcher also took field notes during the interviews to capture the participants' gestures, facial expressions, and emphases.

### Data Analysis

A content analysis technique was utilised to analyse the collected data. Content analysis encompasses the process of defining data, coding it, and classifying these codes to identify themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The steps followed in the analysis process are as follows:

1. Transcription: Voice recordings were transcribed verbatim.
2. Coding: Data were read line by line, and meaningful segments were coded.
3. Category and Theme Creation: Related codes were combined to create upper categories and themes (e.g., pedagogical adequacy, time management).

To ensure the reliability (credibility) of the research, an independent second researcher coded a portion of the data, and the agreement between the two coders was calculated via Miles and Huberman's (1994) formula: [Agreement / (Agreement + Disagreement)] × 100. The intercoder reliability coefficient was 85%, which is considered reliable for qualitative research.

## Findings

In this section, data obtained from interviews conducted from the 2024-2025 academic year at a village school affiliated with the centre of Edirne were analysed. The participants' statements were presented via the "direct quotation" technique and interpreted by the researcher within the context of the literature. The three main themes determined as a result of the analysis are detailed under the headings: (1) Pedagogical Method Conflict and 'Learned Helplessness', (2) Compulsory 'Shadow Teaching' and Socioeconomic Barriers, and (3) Dual Perception of the Multigrade Classroom: Peer Tutoring and Academic Loss.

### Pedagogical Method Conflict and 'Learned Helplessness'

Research data indicate that parents experience severe "cognitive conflict" between the teaching methods applied at school and their own past learning experiences. A vast majority of the participants stated that they were unfamiliar with the "phonics-based sentence method" included in the current curriculum of the Ministry of National Education. This situation renders study hours at home inefficient and can become a crisis, damaging the parent-child relationship.

Technical problems, particularly during the teaching of sounds (phonemes), push parents toward two different strategies: while some parents attempt to bridge this gap via internet technologies (a proactive approach), others insist on traditional methods to manage the process.

Parent K4, who attempts to learn using digital tools, conveyed their effort as follows:

"The teacher gives the sound as 'l', 'm' at school, but we know them as 'le', 'me'. To avoid teaching the child incorrectly, I watch teacher videos on YouTube first in the evenings. I look at how the sound comes out of the mouth, then I go to the child. Nevertheless, it is not like the teacher; the child corrects me, saying, 'Mum, the teacher does not elongate it like that'. I feel like a student myself."

In contrast, the statements of parent K9, who experiences helplessness in the face of pedagogical inadequacy and reverts to the traditional method, reveal the conflict at home:

"The child cannot blend 'b-a'. I get angry and shout, 'Son, be-a makes ba, what do not you understand?' The child starts crying, saying, 'My teacher will get angry; she said not to read like that.' This is what we know. I cannot explain it any other way. I wish they had given us a course at the beginning of the year."

When these two views are compared, it is understood that while parents' intentions are common (to support the child), the lack of pedagogical equipment reduces the quality of support and leads to method confusion in the child.

### Compulsory 'Shadow Teaching' and Socio-Economic Barriers

The "independent study" hours, which arise from the nature of multigrade classrooms, draw the parent into the centre of the educational process. However, findings reveal that this "assistant teacher" (shadow teacher) role conflicts with the heavy workload of rural life. The intensity of agricultural activities, particularly in the Edirne region, has become the fundamental factor determining the quality and duration of time parents can allocate to

their children.

Parents define the obligation to fill the academic void created at home while the teacher attends to other grades at school as a "burden of conscience". The views of participants K2 and K6 strikingly demonstrate the effect of the seasonal cycle on education.

Parent K6: "Winter is alright, we are at home, we make them read by the stove. Nevertheless, when the rice season or planting time occurs, the situation changes. We go to the field early in the morning, and we return completely exhausted. The child says, 'Mum read this.' My eyes cannot see due to fatigue. I say, 'Do it yourself,' and then I suffer pangs of conscience. Is the child of the civil servant in the city the same as ours?"

In addition, the "feeling of inadequacy" created by this role is more pronounced among parents with lower educational levels. Parent K5 summarised the situation as follows:

"The teacher says, 'Revise at home, reinforce the subject'. Nevertheless, what is the subject? I barely finished primary school. They ask about sets in maths or something, I look at it, it looks at me. I have to hand the job over to his older brother (who goes to secondary school). I can only pour his tea and say 'Well done, son'."

These findings prove that the success of the multigrade classroom system is dependent mainly on the family's socioeconomic and cultural capital.

## *Dual Perception of the Multigrade Classroom: Peer Tutoring and Academic Loss*

When participants' perceptions of multigrade classroom practices are examined, it is evident that while views focus on "disadvantage", some positive outcomes in the context of "social learning" (peer tutoring) are also recognised.

The vast majority of parents believe that their children cannot focus on noisy environments and fall behind monograde classrooms. Parent K1 associated this anxiety with the fear of a "lost generation":

"In the class, Grade 1's are decoding syllables, Grade 3's are solving problems. It is unclear who understands what in that noise. My child gets distracted very quickly. I compare him with my nephew in the city centre; he has finished a book; ours cannot even form a sentence yet. It feels as if our children are slipping through the cracks, as if the state is indifferent, implying that 'it does not matter whether they read or not'."

However, contrary to this general negative perception, some scholars also argue that the heterogeneous structure of the multigrade classroom accelerates learning through "modelling". Participant K10 approached this situation from a different perspective:

"Actually, in a way, it is good. Mine is Grade 1, but by listening to Grade 3 lessons, he has memorised the multiplication table. His older brothers help him during break time. Everyone is like a sibling at school. Perhaps he would not be this socialised if he were alone in a single class."

These opposing views (K1 and K10) reveal that while the multigrade classroom practice is considered risky for academic achievement (cognitive), it harbours latent benefits for social skills and peer solidarity (affective). However, the common denominator among parents is that academic achievement comes first and that the current system cannot provide it without family support.

## Discussion

This study aimed to examine the quality of family involvement in the initial literacy process in multigrade classrooms and parents' experiences with this process. The findings obtained from the research reveal that the structural difficulties of multigrade classrooms draw the family into the centre of education. However, socioeconomic and pedagogical barriers limit the quality of this support.

The first finding of the research, "pedagogical method conflict", showed that parents are torn between the traditional syllabic method and the current phonics-based sentence method while helping their children. Akyol (2019) stated that failure to ensure the unity of methods in initial literacy teaching can lead to cognitive confusion and learned helplessness in the pupil. The fear of "doing more harm than good" experienced by the parents in this study confirms Akyol's warnings. Similarly, in a study by Summak et al. (2017), the most common complaint among teachers working in multigrade classrooms was that parents disrupted the structure built at school by applying incorrect teaching techniques at home. In this study, in rural Edirne, the parents' insistence on teaching the sound "b" as "be" is a concrete indicator of the pedagogical disconnection between school and home.

When the sociological dimension of the study is scrutinised, the findings can be explained by Pierre Bourdieu's theory of "cultural capital". Bourdieu (1986) argues that an individual's academic success is closely related to the family's accumulated cultural capital and a habitus compatible with the education system. In this research, the "feeling of inadequacy" experienced by parents with low educational levels or who cannot allocate time to their children due to agricultural work is, in fact, a deficit of cultural capital. The limited time teachers have in multigrade classrooms shifts educational responsibility to the family; this situation places children from families with high cultural capital (those who use digital resources and are educated) in an advantageous position while pushing children from disadvantaged families out of the system. Dursun's (2006) findings on inequality of opportunity in education in rural areas align with this study's findings; the multigrade classroom practice renders the family's socioeconomic status the most determinative variable of student success.

Nevertheless, the statements of some parents, such as "my child learns from upper grades", which emerged in the "perceptions of the multigrade classroom" theme of the research, are in line with Lev Vygotsky's "Zone of Proximal Development" (ZPD) theory. Vygotsky (1978) argues that learning is a social process and that a child's potential development increases when the child interacts with a "more knowledgeable other" (MKO). The heterogeneous structure of multigrade classrooms allows students in upper grades (grades 3 and 4) to become natural "peer tutors" or "models" for Grade 1 pupils. Little (2006) also stated in her international studies that multigrade environments offer unique opportunities for peer tutoring when managed correctly. However, the vast majority of parents in this research focused on noise and distraction rather than this potential benefit. This situation can be explained by the perception of academic success as an "individual race" in the Turkish context and by the fact that the culture of cooperative learning has not yet achieved a complete response among parents.

In conclusion, the initial literacy process in multigrade classrooms is challenging, with the family serving as a "compulsory substitute" rather than the school-family partnership idealised by Epstein (2001). The time-management problems and pedagogical inadequacies experienced by parents risk widening the academic gap in these schools.

## Conclusion

This study has revealed the experiences and support mechanisms of families, one of the most critical stakeholders of the initial literacy process, in a primary school with multigrade classrooms located in rural Edirne. The research results indicate that the multigrade classroom practice removes the family from being a "natural partner of the educational process" and moves it to the position of a "compulsory teaching assistant" because of the teacher's time and space constraints.

The synthesis of the findings reveals that parents are strongly motivated to support their children's education. However, this motivation cannot translate into qualified academic support because of pedagogical method deficiencies and socioeconomic barriers (agricultural workload, time constraints). In particular, the conflict between the "phonics-based sentence method" and the "syllabic method" that parents brought from the past creates cognitive confusion in students' minds and slows the reading process.

When viewed through Bourdieu's "cultural capital" theory, the effectiveness of "independent study" hours in multigrade classrooms depends mainly on the family's academic capacity at home. This situation damages the principle of equality of opportunity in education; students who cannot receive academic support from their families are at increased risk of falling into a disadvantaged position compared with their peers in monograde classrooms. On the other hand, in support of Vygotsky's "Zone of Proximal Development" theory, some students learn through modelling from their peers in upper grades. However, the general perception of parents tends to characterise this situation as "chaotic" or "loss".

Ultimately, initial literacy teaching in multigrade classrooms is far from a process that can be sustained solely with the school's resources in its current state. The family stands as the "invisible carrier" of this system; however, the failure to strengthen this carrier pedagogically and psychologically constitutes the system's weakest link.

## Recommendations

In line with the findings obtained from the research and the conclusions reached, the following recommendations have been developed for practitioners (Ministry of National Education, school administrators, teachers) and researchers:

### Recommendations for Practice

1. Parent Academies and Method Workshops: Applied "Initial literacy guidance" seminars for parents should be organised in village schools with multigrade classrooms before the start of the academic year (within the scope of Orientation Week). In these seminars, the pronunciation of letters and game-based activities that can be performed at home should be demonstrated with concrete examples.

2. Hybrid Support Materials: Considering the time constraints of parents in rural areas, instead of long meetings, short, explanatory videos (capsule content) prepared by the teacher or provided by the Ministry of National Education should be sent to parents' mobile phones. These contents should include how to revise the sound learned that week at home.

3. Structuring "Independent Study" Content: Teachers should design the work sent home for independent study hours in a way that minimises parents' pedagogical intervention and allows the student to do it on their own (autonomous). Thus, the pressure of "playing teachers" on parents can be alleviated.

4. Village Room/Headman Cooperation: For households with limited internet access or physical facilities, "Study Corners" can be created in village headman offices or village rooms. In these areas, university students or volunteers who are literate can support students during independent study hours.

### Recommendations for Researchers

1. Longitudinal Studies: Long-term research monitoring how the academic achievements of students' learning literacy in a multigrade classroom are shaped at the end of Grade 4 or at the secondary school level should be conducted.

2. Action Research: Action research, in which researchers are personally present in a multigrade classroom and test the effectiveness of an education programme developed for parents (e.g., an 8-week parent education module), would contribute to the literature.

3. Comparative Analyses: Quantitative and qualitative studies comparing parent involvement in monograde village schools and multigrade village schools with similar socioeconomic levels should be conducted to clarify whether the problem stems from "being in a village" or the "multigrade classroom" system.

## 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

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical approval granted by the Ethics Committee of Yildiz Technical University.

## Consent

All participants were adults. Written informed consent was obtained.

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## Notes on contributor

Dr. Muhammet Fatih Doğan is currently working as an independent researcher. He is working on self-regulated learning, Multiple Intelligence Theory, daily life problem-solving skills, good kid phenomenon, virtue education and science education. His aim is to carry out scientific and academic studies to ensure that children are raised through education as "good" and "skilful" individuals who can make useful and realistic contributions to themselves and the society in which they live. He lives in Tekirdağ, Türkiye.

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Muhammet Fatih Doğan⒞⒭⒯ Conceptualization, Data curation, Writing – original draft and Writing – review & editing.

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## Appendices

### *Appendix A: Semistructured Interview Form*

Instructions: "Hello, the purpose of this interview is to understand your experiences, the difficulties you encounter, and your role in this process from your perspective regarding your child's literacy learning process. Your answers will be used solely for scientific purposes, and your identity will be kept confidential. If you are ready, let us begin."

#### *Section 1: Introduction and Warm-up Questions*

1. How would you describe the classroom environment (multigrade classroom) where your child is educated to someone who has never seen it? What is the experience of being a Grade 1 pupil in this class like, in your opinion?
2. When you think about the adventure of literacy learning from the first day your child starts school to today, what is the first emotion or thought that comes to mind? (e.g., fear, excitement, confusion, pride)

#### *Section 2: Participation in the Educational Process and Role Perception*

3. How does your day pass regarding literacy activities when your child comes home from school? Could you describe a typical "study evening" for us?
4. How do you strike a balance between your daily chores (housework, field, livestock, other children, etc.) and the responsibility of helping your child study? What do you prioritise when you experience a lack of time?
5. Do you feel obliged to complete the subjects at home that the teacher could not catch up on at school or that you think remained incomplete during "independent study" hours? Do you see yourself merely as a "mother/father" or like an "assistant teacher" in this process?

#### *Section 3: Pedagogical Method and Technical Support*

6. Is there a difference between the method the teacher uses when teaching letters at school (the way sounds are produced, blending technique) and what you know from your own schooldays?
7. Are there moments when you struggle the most, get stuck, or say "I do not know how to explain this" while helping your child practice reading and writing? From whom or where do you receive support in these moments? (Internet, neighbour, older sibling, etc.)

#### *Section 4: Perception of the Multigrade Classroom and Expectations*

8. Do you think that the fact that your child attends lessons in the same classroom with upper grades (grades 2, 3, or 4) affects their reading process positively or negatively? (like noise, distraction, or learning from older brothers).
9. How much does your communication with other parents or the teacher help you in this process? What are your expectations from the teacher (more homework, more guidance, etc.)?
10. If you had a magic wand and the authority was yours, what would be the first thing you would change to facilitate the work of children learning literacy in multigrade classrooms and their families?

## Appendix B: Themes, Categories, and Codes Obtained within the Scope of Research

| Main Themes | Categories | Codes |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Theme 1:**<br><br>**Pedagogical Method Conflict and Technical Inadequacy** | **Method Confusion (Cognitive Conflict)** | • Saying letter name instead of letter sound (be instead of b)<br><br>• Inability to abandon syllabification habit<br><br>• Inconsistency between school and home teaching<br><br>• Child correcting/objecting to the parent |
| | **Effort to Eliminate Technical Knowledge Deficiency** | • Learning method from the internet/YouTube<br><br>• Teaching through trial and error<br><br>• Random resource usage<br><br>• Feeling of helplessness/inadequacy |
| **Theme 2:**<br><br>**Compulsory "Shadow Teaching" and Socio-Economic Barriers** | **Role Perception and Responsibility** | • Compensating for "independent study" hours at home<br><br>• Seeing oneself as an assistant teacher<br><br>• Feeling solely responsible for the educational process<br><br>• Burden of conscience and guilt |
| | **Environmental and Physical Barriers** | • Agricultural workload (planting/harvest season)<br><br>• Housework and animal care<br><br>• Physical fatigue and depletion of patience<br><br>• Time management crisis |
| **Theme 3:** | **Perception of Academic Disadvantage** | • Fear of being neglected (Teacher cannot catch up) |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Perception of Multigrade Classroom: Academic Anxiety and Social Interaction** | | • Noise and distraction |
| | | • Envying monograde classrooms (city schools) |
| | | • Worry of "slipping through the cracks" |
| | **Social/Peer Learning** | • Modelling upper grades (older brothers/sisters) |
| | | • Peer assistance during breaks |
| | | • Familiarity with advanced subjects |
| | | • Sibling environment |