Potential of Mixed Ability Groups in Educational Institutions

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"The difficulty lies not in the new ideas, but in escaping from the old ones." Lord Keynes

Prelude

The last few decades have left significant and lasting imprints on the education system in Pakistan. Highly individualistic, self-centered and competitive corporate approaches on the economic fronts influenced the working and ethics of the education sector too. During 1980s and 1990s, we witnessed the education policy makers, educational administrators, and parents breathlessly advocating the merits of competition in educational pursuits. The rat-race to achieve ascendancy, preferably number one position at any cost led to spread of several ills in our education system, of which use of unfair means in examinations, bribing invigilators and examiners, preference for rote-learning, and demotivation of academically weak students are only few to mention here. Sometimes, in the first half of 1990s, educationists and policy-makers started taking stock of what was happening to the education system in the name of competition and quality.

During my nineteen years of association with the educational activities, I have tried my best to seek new knowledge, pondered over my thoughts and attempted to practice whatever little I have learned over the years. About six years ago, I started my Masters in Educational Planning and Management from Allama Iqbal Open University Islamabad. During the course of my study, I came across the concept of Mixed Ability

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Groups, whereby pupils of mixed abilities are grouped together so that the abilities of the most promising student are used for enhancing the learning abilities of rest of the group. This concept has been borrowed from those village schools, where there is scarcity of both teachers and pupils. Many such schools have only one permanent teacher and fairly less number of pupils, thus it becomes almost impossible to divide them in different classes from I to V. After reading about this concept, I was stirred to apply it in the school, where I was serving at that time.

The Concept

To impart education, different systems of education are used, namely formal, informal and non-formal. Under the former, the instruction is deliberately planned, is provided usually in schools, colleges and universities and is based on pre-determined curricula. On the other extreme, people also learn attitudes, values, skills and knowledge from the daily experiences and educative influences emerging from family, friends, neighbourhood, work, libraries and mass media. This arrangement is known as informal education. In between these two, there exists non-formal education, which includes any organized educational activity outside the formal education system, but is intended to serve some identifiable learning clientele and learning objectives. The concept of Mixed Ability Groups seeks to get maximum out of all these education systems in order to provide extensive teaching-learning opportunities to students.

How the Concept was applied in Practical Situation?

At the time of this experiment, I was posted at Administrative Trades Training School, Kohat as Officer In Charge, Education Training Squadron. My actual assignments included supervision of Progress and

Training Control and duties as 2 i/c of the unit. I shared my enthusiasm about the concept with my Officer Commanding, who permitted me to go ahead with its implementation in the school.

The concept of Mixed Ability Groups refers to practice of dividing a class into groups of 4-5 students each, with varying ability or achievement level. The aim of this method is to use the potential of learners in addition to class instructors in various teaching learning tasks. Students are usually grouped according to their previous achievement in such a way that each group contains students of high, moderate and low achievement. Here, one aspect of this concept needs clarification. Ability of a person is not a constant entity; it is highly dynamic. An able student, who does not work hard continuously, soon finds out that his performance in the class is sliding down. On the other hand, a low performer, who "burns midnight oil", usually gets reward in the form of higher grades. In this way, labelling a student as highly able, mediocre or less able would not only be misleading, but also demoralising for low performers. Further, in addition to academic shades of students, multi-ethnic colour can also be introduced in these groups through representation of students of different ethnic and social background in common groups. Personal friendships and mutual liking among students presents both challenges and opportunities. While forming the study groups, due consideration could be given to preferences of students, if the criteria of mixed achievement levels and multi-ethnicity are not compromised.

Methodology

In order to introduce mixed ability groups in the school, following methodology was adopted: -

(a) **Briefing to School Management and Instructors.** A comprehensive briefing was arranged for school management and instructors whereby they were informed that the aims of the concept were to enable the learners to use their own potential for academic advancement of all the members of the group, to promote the atmosphere of cooperation instead of competition and to increase understanding among different ethnic and linguistic groups. Every class incharge was asked to form study groups on the basis of the students' achievements in previous tests, also keeping in view the socio-ethnic background. Each group comprised 4-5 students, with one group leader among them. The group members were to use cooperative teaching-learning techniques. Each group had the liberty to choose the time and place of study in their spare time. The academic problems requiring consultation or guidance were to be discussed in the group. If any of the problems remained un-resolved due to lack of knowledge or experience, the same was to be brought to the notice of class incharge or instructor. The class incharge were asked to keep an eye on the working of each study group on regular basis. Problems and issues needing intervention at higher level were to be periodically referred to Officers in-charge and the Officer Commanding.

(b) **Briefing to the Students.** On the pattern similar to the stated above, the students of the school were also given a comprehensive briefing. They were categorically told that their role in these groups was pivotal as well crucial since the concept would not work without their active involvement. After the formation of the groups, the trainee with the highest academic

record was given the role of the group leader. The task of the group leader was to ensure functioning of the group as a unit in helping the group members to improve upon their professional/academic knowledge. The group leaders were encouraged to give special attention to the academic needs of the weaker members so that they can catch up with the rest of the group.

(c) **Seating Arrangements.** Seating arrangements and accommodation plans in the barracks were made in such a way that the members of a group were always close-by so that they could easily consult each other on academic matters.

(d) **Periodical Checks**. Although study groups largely work on their own, supervision of their progress was ensured to check the following: -

- Whether the groups were functioning properly and meeting regularly?
- Was there marked improvement in the academic achievements of different groups?
- Were there internal rifts or personality clashes in some groups?
- In case of no improvement in certain group, what were the reasons?

Limitations and Problems

Following limitations and problems were encountered while applying the concept of Mixed Ability Groups: -

(a) Since the concept makes use of formal, informal and non-formal education systems at the same time, it was initially difficult especially for instructors to comprehend the need and use of the concept. To counter this problem, briefings to instructors and the subsequent meetings between Officers Incharge and instructors were made comprehensive and inspiring.

(b) At times, it became obvious that over-supervision by some instructors was spoiling the benefits; therefore, supervisors were duly guided to contain their over-enthusiasm.

(c) The biggest impediment to implementation of this concept came from supervisors and instructors themselves, many of whom were reluctant to change their old ways of doing things.

Results Achieved

Until year 2003, the results of the school were sliding down. Though the results remained above 90%, nevertheless, target was set to achieve 100% results. About four months after the mixed ability groups were introduced in the school, the target of 100% results was achieved. This was no mean achievement, however, at personal level, I think that the following consequences of implementation of the concept were more commendable than the figure of results: -

(a) An atmosphere of enthusiasm about teaching-learning process flourished among the students.

(b) Most of the students especially liked the emphasis on cooperation in teaching-learning activities than competition.

(c) Implementation of the concept of Mixed-ability Groups also led to flourishing of collective learning and mutual benefits of collective teaching-learning process.

Conclusion

Forming mixed-ability groups in educational institutions is one of the innovative teaching-learning methods. It aims at using the potential of learners in addition to class instructors in different learning activities. Methodology of the implementation of this concept involves briefing to school management, instructors and students, ensuring close-by seating and accommodation arrangements and periodical checks. Since the concept calls for departure from the present competitive environment to cooperative learning, some instructors and students usually question its need or validity. Another stumbling block arises because of reluctance of instructors and learners to change their old ways of doing things. These problems can be resolved by arranging comprehensive briefings and meetings between the school management, instructors and learners.