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The MultiGradeMultiLevel-Methodology and its Global Significance

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This is an English translation, revision and updated and expanded version of 'Lernen mit Lernleitern' (2012) which had described the MultiGradeMultiLevel-Methodology (MGML) for primary education developed by the Rishi Valley Institute for Educational Resources (RIVER) in India. The book is written by educationists of the Universities of Regensburg and Würzburg in Germany, whose interests in MGML were first sparked in 2002.

The book explores the history and design of MGML, describes its characteristics and its relevance for today's world. MGML variants in other parts of India (including in some secondary schools), in Nepal and Ethiopia and in Germany are noted. It also sets out a set of curriculum steps for learning about MGML (teacher education) and a research agenda

Since the 1980s the development of MGML has been led by Padmanabha Rao and Anumula Rama and trialled in 12 satellite schools in small rural villages surrounding the larger and well known Rishi Valley School, established in 1931 by the Indian education philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurti. Known in its early development as 'School in a box', the MGML programme has grown to such an extent that it is practised in an estimated 100,000 schools in India while the RIVER Institute now coordinates the programme, develops materials, provides initial and continuing education to teachers and orientations for groups of educationists from around the world.

The method starts from 'the natural heterogeneity of all children and acknowledges the singularity of their respective learning processes' (p 28). The approach is activity and task-oriented and 'joyful'. The pace and sequencing of learning is managed by the children themselves, a concept encapsulated by the expression 'the child is in the driving seat'. The approach is best described as individualised learning guided by 'ladders of learning' that sequenced learning tasks and respective evaluations. Children proceed through the learning sequences at their own pace. A large pool of well-designed and sequenced 2D and 3D learning materials is available for language studies, mathematics and environmental studies (EVS). These reflect the curriculum objectives for Grades 1-5 of the Indian National Curriculum. The ladders are subdivided into 'milestones' linked with a sequence of introductory, reinforcement, evaluation, remediation and enrichment activities. The ladders for language and mathematics are linear with serial progression of activities through small incremental units. The ladder for EVS is described as 'systemic' with a cluster of themes and multiple starting points. Essentially the materials for learning are small, manageable, joyful, meaningful, holistic and integral. Throughout the day children learn in various types of grouping – teacher-based, employed especially when new themes/concepts are introduced;

partly-teacher based; peer group-based where children work across age groups to assist each other; individual, where the material guides the child's learning.

Descriptions of MGML are available in several English-language publications¹ which are somewhat lighter to read than this volume. What this book adds to those accounts is an exploration of Cultures of Learning in the 21st century and the applicability of MGML to meeting the challenges and changes presented by *inter alia*, globalisation, the clash, melt and expansion of cultural spaces, issues of lifestyle, exclusion and inclusion, and issues of global and cultural identity. MGML is 'more than material, more than structures, more than a simple method. The methodology is embedded in a holistic perception and understanding of an integral world...(MGML offers) a stable framework that enables them to incorporate and culturally as well as regionally elaborate on these changes' (pp 78-79). The discussion of schooling in the context of global developments leads the reader through seven fundamental characteristics of globalisation, the global multifaceted process of exclusion, the disruptions entailed in the transitions from traditional to modern and post modern society, and the challenges of living collectively in uncertainty. It also introduces the non German speaker to the philosophical concept of *concreation*, expressed as 'the interaction of everybody in everything that is happening' or the integral participation within the interconnection of the single in the whole (p. 98). The authors hypothesise that MGML 'with its own 'powers of self transcendence' represents an integral culture of living and learning practice. It points beyond itself towards the practice of a learning life' (p 99). They hypothesise that 'the MGML-Methodology provides a pedagogical feedback tool of undivided practice of learning and living that reconnects with the learning life, the global and the universal' (p 99) that resonates with the German concept of *concreation*.

The authors underline, properly, the point that MGML is more than a tool, a collection of ladders or a deep and wide pool of materials, even if this is how most observers of the programme and possibly many MGML practitioners think about it. MGML is a pedagogy and pedagogy is much more than teaching techniques. Pedagogy links techniques with discourses of learning and life and epistemologies. The authors set out some key aspects of Krishnamurti's thinking –

'life is a constant process of teaching and learning. So there ... in the very nature of teaching and learning there is humility. You are the teacher and you are the taught. So there is no pupil and there is no teacher, no guru and no sisha, there is only learning and teaching that is going on with me. I am learning and I am also teaching myself: the whole process is one' (Krishnamurti, 1974, p 149 quoted on p 14).

Learning is for life and life is for learning.

At a general level Krishnamurti's discourse is consistent with both the concept of concreation as described above and the curriculum intentions of MGML. Moreover the global contexts in which Krishnamurti was working and writing and in which MGML was born were rather different from the social, economic, political and technological contexts of the 21st century. It is not clear whether the authors i) are employing contemporary German and other discourses about globalisation and education to draw the attention of German-speaking audiences (and others) to education techniques of relevance to contemporary challenges, or ii) consider MGML to be an approach whose relevance endures across time and space and

¹ See for example <http://www.rishivalley.org/features/Rationale%20for%20a%20Multi-Grade%20Multi-Level%20Pedagogy.pdf> accessed January 27th 2016; Girg R., Lichtinger U. and Muller T. (2011) The MultiGradeMultiLevel-Methodology and its Global Significance, S. Rodere-Verlag

is consistent with multiple contexts and philosophies, or iii) consider MGML to be an approach whose relevance worldwide is superior to all others. Elsewhere RIVER has asserted that MGML 'is not tied to any particular theory of learning: either constructivist or behaviourist'².

In their final chapter the authors outline questions for research. One of these 'which effects does working with the MGML-Methodology and Ladders of Learning have on the participating pupils, teacher trainees and teachers?' is as important as it is ambitious. To date there are few systematic evaluations of the effects of MGML on pupils' learning and teachers' learning and teaching that have been able compare participants in MGML with participants following other approaches³. Nor, to my knowledge, are there longitudinal studies that have been able to follow into post primary education and employment students who have studied in MGML classrooms⁴. This broad question demands both considerable elaboration and specification and suggests a major research agenda for the future.

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² <http://www.rishivalley.org/features/Rationale%20for%20a%20Multi-Grade%20Multi-Level%20Pedagogy.pdf>
accessed January 27th 2016

³ for a review of methodological aspects of studies of the MGML-inspired Activity-based learning approach in Tamil Nadu and a recent evaluation see a forthcoming report to be published by DFID on 'Understanding Activity Based Learning (ABL) in Tamil Nadu: Innovation in Pedagogy, Political Economy of Scale-up and the Impact on Learning Outcomes'

⁴ A rare example is to be found in a study of graduates from *Escuela Nueva* in Colombia that bears a close resemblance to MGML). This study focuses on the effects of the *Escuela Nueva* programme on *convincencia*, translated to English as peaceful social interaction Forero-Piend, C., Escobar-Rodriguez, D. and Molina, D (2006) *Escuela nueva's* impact on the peaceful social interaction of children in Colombia, in Little, A W (ed.) *Education for All and Multigrade Teaching: challenges and opportunities*, Dordrecht, the Netherlands.