

Book review

***The MultiGradeMultiLevel-Methodology and its Global Significance* by Thomas Müller, Ulrike Lichtinger, and Ralf Girg**

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This is an English translation of a revised, updated, and expanded version of *Lernen mit Lernleitern* (2012) that describes the MultiGradeMultiLevel-Methodology (MGML) for primary education as developed by the Rishi Valley Institute for Educational Resources (RIVER) in India. The book is written by educationists from 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, and describes its characteristics and relevance for today's world. MGML variants in other parts of India (including in some secondary schools), in Nepal, Ethiopia, and Germany are noted. The book also sets out 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. MGML has been 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 a 'school in a box,' the MGML programme has grown to such an extent that it is practised in an estimated 100,000 schools across India, while RIVER now coordinates the programme, develops materials, and provides initial and continuing teacher education and orientations workshops 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 individualized learning guided

by 'ladders of learning' that sequence 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 to 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 learning materials 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; and individual, where the child's learning is guided by the materials.

Descriptions of MGML are available in several English-language publications (see, for example, Rishi Valley Education Centre, n.d.), 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 twenty-first century, and the applicability of MGML in meeting the challenges and changes presented by, inter alia, globalization; 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. 78–9). The discussion of schooling in the context of global developments leads the reader through seven fundamental characteristics of globalization; 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 hypothesize 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 hypothesize further 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' (ibid.) 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: for instance, '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, as cited 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 twenty-first century. It is not clear whether the authors (1) are employing contemporary German and other discourses about globalization and education to draw the attention of German-speaking audiences (and others) to education techniques of relevance to present-day challenges; or (2) consider MGML to be an approach whose relevance endures across time and space, and is consistent with multiple contexts and philosophies; or (3) 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' (Rishi Valley Education Centre, n.d.).

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 on teachers' learning and teaching that compare participants in MGML with those following other approaches. (For a recent evaluation and review of methodological aspects of studies of the MGML-inspired, activity-based, learning approach in Tamil Nadu, see the DFID's forthcoming report.) Nor, to my knowledge, are there longitudinal studies that have followed, into post-primary education and employment, students who have studied in MGML classrooms – although a rare example is found in a study of graduates from the Colombian *Escuela Nueva* programme, which bears a close resemblance to MGML (Forero-Pienda *et al.*, 2006). (The study focuses on the effects of the *Escuela Nueva* programme on *convincencia*,

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translated into English as 'peaceful social interaction.'). This broad question demands both considerable elaboration and specification and suggests a major research agenda for the future.

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