



Research Currents

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Learning Together: Research into Combined and Multiage Classes

CONTEXT

Graded education, in which students are organized into classes according to age, became the norm in the mid 19th century. As mass public education came into effect and student populations outgrew their one room schoolhouses, forming classes based on age was convenient and economical (Pardini, 2005). Graded education has since become the norm.

CLASSROOM ORGANIZATION

Educators today face a complexity of factors when considering how to configure classes to best meet the needs of all students. Pedagogical considerations as well as practical factors such as fluctuating enrolment, class size and composition influence the formation of balanced classes. Common organizational models in North America include single and combined grade classes. Multiage classes, while much less common, have also been an option since the introduction of graded education.

COMBINED GRADE CLASSES

A combined grade class (also referred to as a split or multigrade class) consists of students in two consecutive grades grouped together in one class. This type of classroom is common both locally and internationally, with "one out of every five Canadian students enrolled in a multigrade classroom" (Veenman, 1995, p. 321). While practical factors such as balancing classes can be the impetus for combined grade classes, affording students greater placement options is a benefit.

All classrooms, whether single or combined grade, include students at varying developmental stages, with a wide range of skills and abilities (Pardini, 2005). Goodlad & Anderson (1987) remind us that children learn

takes the form of alternating between one grade level and the other; direct instruction is provided to one grade while the others do independent work. While the research points to benefits from cross-grade and flexible grouping,

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continually and found that on average, a single grade class is comprised of students whose development spans five years. They emphasize that the developmental range in a combined class is not significantly different.

Research studies examining academic achievement in combined grade classes report that achievement is equal to that in a single grade classroom (Gagajadharsingh, 1991; Gutierrez & Slavin, 1992; Miller, 1991; Veenman, 1995). Lloyd (1999) and Mason & Burns (2002) however, posited that combined grade classes may include a greater number of high achieving students and independent learners.

Noncognitive benefits of combined classes include greater independence, responsibility, more opportunities for emotional and social development and increased positive attitude towards school (Gagajadharsingh, 1991; Miller, 1991; Veenman 1995, 1996).

Numerous studies reveal that teaching core subjects in a combined class often

few studies have examined the effects of specific teaching strategies used by classroom teachers in a combined class setting (Lataille-Démoré, 2007). Lataille-Démoré comments on a shared belief among researchers that students could achieve even greater academic gains if teachers addressed the diversity within a combined grade setting (Combined grade classrooms, 2007, p. 1).

MULTIAGE CLASSES

Multiage classes are a purposeful organizational structure that groups children of different ages and abilities together for educational and pedagogical benefits (Veenman, 1995). Students typically span three grade levels and remain with the same teacher for more than one year. While some grade-specific teaching may occur, cross-grade teaching is the norm, based on the developmental needs of each child (Lloyd, 1999).

Key features of a multiage class include continuous assessment, activities and

strategies designed to help students learn at their own rate, cooperative learning, flexible grouping and integrated, thematic units of study (Pardini, 2005). Benefits of multiage classrooms include achievement gains equal to single grade classes, and increased affective learning, such as improved self-concept, increased pro-social behavior, greater responsibility and more positive attitudes toward school. Increased opportunities for leadership and peer learning are also cited (Gutierrez & Slavin, 1992; Miller, 1991; Pardini, 2005).

Katz (1995) presents a rationale for a multiage configuration:

Single-age groups seem to create enormous normative pressures on the children and the teacher to expect all the children to be at the same place on knowledge and skills. There is a tendency in a homogeneous age group to penalize the children who fail to meet normative expectations. Similarly, there is also a temptation in a group of same-age children to overuse whole-class instruction. There is no evidence to show that a group of children who are all within a 12-month age range can be expected to learn the same things, the same way, the same day, at the same time.

Pardini (2005) notes that while multiage classrooms began with the one room schoolhouse, they have waned in popularity in North America as the system of graded education flourished and grade-level textbooks and tests became commonplace. Most recently, the emphasis on standardized grade-level testing in the U.S. presents significant challenges to the multiage movement (Pardini, p. 2).

OPTIMIZING LEARNING IN COMBINED and MULTIAGE CLASSES

Optimizing learning through the efficient use of instructional practices is vital to all teaching contexts, yet there may be a greater sense of urgency for teachers in combined grade and multiage settings. Researchers have identified specific

practices that support learning in these contexts:

- Explicit instruction
- Cooperative learning/peer tutoring
- Subject integration
- Various, flexible groupings, including cross-grade
- Ongoing authentic assessment
- Differentiated instruction

(Gutierrez & Slavin, 1992; Lataille-Démoré, 2007)

The need for professional collaboration and parent involvement is also highlighted in the literature (Johnson & Fox, 1998).

CONCLUSIONS

Current research on the topic of combined and multiage classes is scarce. According to Gutierrez & Slavin (1992), new studies combining quantitative and qualitative methods are necessary to understand what is different about combined and multiage classes and how these impact student learning. Mason & Burns (1996) agree, noting that the majority of studies have over-relied on standardized test data.

Research into combined and multiage classes points to the importance of recognizing and responding to individual student differences. As Veenman (1995) explains, "Successful learning is less dependent on organizational strategies than on the quality of instructional practices" (p. 370).

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