

Practical Leadership

*Improving the Schools of Today
Inventing the Schools of Tomorrow*

RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE

Multi-Grade Classrooms

In A Nutshell

While the single grade classroom remains the predominant model in American schools, there is growing interest in the multi-grade model. The multi-grade approach is often selected for administrative reasons due to low enrollment, or budget constraints. But some schools are organizing students in multi-grade classrooms for pedagogical or philosophical reasons. Due to specific grade-level expectations and standards interest in multi-grade classrooms has declined in recent years.

Research on implementing multi-grades classrooms shows no significant impact on student learning for students. Learning is neither improved nor hindered. There are, however, significant non-cognitive effects. Students in multi-grades classrooms express more positive attitudes toward school, are less anxious about school and have a more positive self-concept. They also have a greater sense of community.

The Multi-Grade Model

A multi-grade classroom has been part of American schools since their inception. Early schools were organized this way by necessity due to small enrollment or few teachers. The multi-grade model fell out of favor as rural schools consolidated and grew in size.

There is no single organizational arrangement for a multi-grades program. The combination of grade levels varies from school to school and is shaped by school-level factors such as enrollment, staffing, curricular requirements and the comfort of parents and community with a multi-grades model. Frequently classrooms have students from two grades due to uneven student enrollment or having fewer teachers than grade levels. In this model the grade levels generally remain distinct and students continue to be identified with their grade-level peers. In other models, students are not identified by chronological grade.

Other multi-grade models use other combinations. For example, a K-1-2 model might be used to provide an integrated early elementary experience for students. In such classrooms there is often fluidity to the curriculum and students are able to advance through the curriculum at their own pace, still guided by the grade-level expectations (Mariano & Kirby, 2009). Often a single teacher instructs students for two or more academic years.

Other models exist including schools that are totally ungraded and/or include students from every grade in the school. They are often described as “open” or “ungraded” schools. The pedagogy present in these schools is often distinctly different from that in traditional K-12 schools.

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Rationale for considering a multi-grade model often includes the following:

- Students learn from other students. Younger children overhear and observe lessons taught to older students and this helps prepare them for future instruction. Older children hear lessons for younger children and this allows them to review and reinforce basic concepts.
- Students learn to become productive learners by receiving a mix of both individual instruction and personal reflection/work time.
- Students' social skills develop because of the interaction with other age groups.
- Students receive an increased sense of personal responsibility.
- The multi-grade classroom is an extension of the "real world" where people rarely work with others of a single age or ability level.
- When the same teacher instructs a student for more than one year the teacher gets to know the student better, understands their strengths, weaknesses and learning habits.

<http://www.immanuelmayville.com/multigrade.pdf>

Student Learning in a Multi-Grades Setting

Much of the research on multi-grade classrooms is dated and was done in the early 1990's when the model was more prevalent. Few studies have been conducted in rural settings (Miller, 1990).

Studies found that students in multi-grade settings learn no more or no less than students in single-grade settings (Hoffman, 2003; Mason & Burns, 1996; Veenman, 1995). Generally, there is no significant difference in student learning based upon the grade organization of the school. Miller (1990) found that multi-grade classes do not affect reading achievement negatively. Rather, he found that it enhanced reading achievement for average to high-achieving students.

Other Student Outcomes

One of the most significant findings about multi-grade settings is the positive impact on non-cognitive factors. Studies found that students in multi-grade settings had more positive attitudes toward school, possessed less anxiety toward school, and had a more positive self-concept than students in single-grade classrooms (Veenman, 1995). Other studies found that students in multi-grade settings bonded within their group, particularly when students worked together for more than one year (Daniel, 2007). This sense of community contributed to other positive outcomes like fewer disciplinary referrals (Pavan, 1992). Student social development was not impacted by a multi-grade setting (Pratt and Teacy, 1986).

Impact on Teachers

Studies of multi-grade settings found that the burden of dealing with different curricula placed greater demands on classroom teachers. This often resulted in less attention to individual students and increased stress for teachers (Russell, Rowe & Hill, 1998; Veenman, 1995). One consistent finding is that multi-grade classrooms are most successful where teachers are committed to the model and able to support one another throughout implementation (Lloyd, 1999). These collaborative relationships allowed teachers to do things like group and regroup students as needed and to complement one another's instructional strengths.

Thoughtful planning for implementing a multi-grade program is essential. Most teachers have no experience in a multi-grade setting and often feel inadequately prepared for teaching in a multi-grade classroom (Mariano & Kirby, 2009). Teachers are most successful when they are skilled at differentiated instruction, flexible grouping within their classroom, and social collaboration among students (Hoffman, 2003). Miller (1991) found that teachers require time for preparing materials, organizing classrooms and individualizing and differentiating curriculum.

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Summary

Evidence about the impact of multi-grades classrooms shows that the model neither promotes nor inhibits student learning but it shows significant impact on non-cognitive factors like relationships with peers, attitude toward school and self-concept. When implementing a multi-grades model it is important to provide teachers with time to thoughtfully plan for a multi-grade organization, to design curricular and instructional units and materials, and to arrange opportunities for collaboration with other multi-grades teachers.

Online Resources

Achievement of Students in Multigrade Classrooms – Mariano & Kirby, 2009

This study prepared by RAND Corporation examines data about recent multi-grade classrooms models in Los Angeles

http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/working_papers/2009/RAND_WR685.pdf

The Multi-Grade Classroom: A Resource Handbook for Small, Rural Schools

Education Northwest (1999)

This site includes seven modules examining the [research on multi-grade models](#) and downloadable resources for organizing and implementing a multi-grade model. While the modules were developed years ago they provide helpful guidance for constructing a multi-grades model.

<http://educationnorthwest.org/resource/1680>

Planning and Instructional Modules include:

[Classroom Organization](#)

[Classroom Management and Discipline](#)

[Instructional Organization, Curriculum and Evaluation](#)

[Instructional Delivery and Grouping](#)

[Self-Directed Learning](#)

[Planning and Using Peer Tutoring](#)

Teaching in a Multi-Grade Classroom

Alaska has more multi-grades classrooms than any other state. The University of Alaska developed a set of resources for teachers considering working in a multi-grade setting. Toward the bottom of this link is a set of “Questions and Short Answers” that can be used to engage teachers in a discussion of the multi-grade option.

http://alaskateacher.org/multigrade_teaching.php

Teaching and Learning in the Multi-Grade Classroom

This ERIC Digest from the *Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools* provides insights into implementing a multi-grade model.

<http://www.ericdigests.org/pre-9221/teaching.htm>

Association for Middle Level Education – Research Summary – Daniel, 2007

This summary synthesizes the research on multiage and multi-grades classrooms at the middle grades (4-8).

<http://www.amle.org/Research/ResearchSummaries/MultiageGrouping/tabid/1282/Default.aspx>

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Review of Quantitative Research on Multi-Grade Instruction - 1990

This paper discusses the qualitative studies on multi-grade classrooms.

<http://www.jrre.psu.edu/articles/v7,n1,p1-8,Miller.pdf>

Review of Qualitative Research on Multi-Grade Instruction - 1991

This paper discusses the qualitative studies on multi-grade classrooms.

<http://www.jrre.psu.edu/articles/v7,n2,p3-12,Miller.pdf>

This *Research into Practice* brief was prepared by Practical Leadership, LLC and authored by Ronald Williamson, Professor of Educational Leadership at Eastern Michigan University and Howard Johnston, Professor of Secondary Education at the University of South Florida. The brief is prepared for use by principals and school staff in Oregon GEAR UP schools.

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