

Preparing for Split Class Inevitability by: John MacLeod

Ahh! The dreaded (for most teachers) split class dilemma. Few want it; most hate it. The reality is that most of us have, will, or will again have this educational experience in our careers, and probably sooner than later. In a comprehensive study of Canadian schools completed by Margaret Gayfer and Joel Gajadharsingh and published in 1991 entitled, *The Multi-grade Classroom: Myth and Reality*, it was conservatively estimated that one of every seven classrooms in Canada were multi-grade or split classes representing one of every five students.

The study examined data collected from 10% of the 968 school districts across the country. It questioned superintendents, school administrators, and teachers from each province and territory with proportional consideration given to rural, urban and combined rural/urban settings. While the report drew twenty-eight conclusions and six major recommendations, the overriding conclusion from the study was that multi-grade classes are not going away. In fact, while current data on split grade classes is sparse, the Ontario Department of Education reported in 2001, ten years after Gayfer's study, that 23.8% of students were in split classrooms at the elementary level or one of every four students. This number climbs to 25-35% in the French school districts.

While we are in the 'business' of educating our future leaders and citizens, few of the principals and superintendents who responded to the study survey cited pedagogical reasons for creating multi-grade classrooms. The main reasons offered were enrollments, balancing class sizes, and budget constraints. Though they stated they looked for experienced multi-grade teachers to head a split class, 43% of the teachers of these classrooms had fewer than five years experience in the teaching profession. Not very good 'business' when you give your least experienced staff the most challenging assignments. It also means 57% of the teachers of multi-grade classes had more than five years experience. Teachers just like you.

More than 80% of teachers in multi-grade classrooms reported having had no special training in teaching to multi-grade classes, either during teacher training programs or through in-services. They also attested to struggling to use the standard single grade curriculum in those classes as no curricula materials were designed for multi-grade classes.

Most teachers in the study commented on the frustrations of working with a multi-grade class which resulted in low teacher satisfaction and a reluctance to return to such a setting. The reality of the situation is though, as we see from the Ontario statistics for 2001, we are more likely to be in front of a split class in the future despite any reluctance on our part. If we want to avoid the frustrations and stress associated with such an assignment, then we need to take a proactive approach to our own teaching practice. There are tried and true approaches and strategies to instruction in split classes which can be incorporated into your regular single class practice as well.

One such approach is to adopt a multiage philosophy towards classroom instruction, whether you have a single grade or multiple grades. Interestingly enough, when teachers in the study were asked what strategies worked best in their multi-grade classrooms, they indicated grouping students in various ways, integrating content under themes or topics, individualized instruction, cooperative work, independent research, peer instruction, and project work as being the most successful. These are many of the same strategies promoted and used by teachers who, by design, are in multiage settings.

While a split class is not the same as a multiage classroom, where three grades for multiple years are the preference, it does have a broad range of ages (up to three years) and abilities, from struggling to enrichment. Whether or not you are in a single grade or multiage class, adopting the philosophy of making the program fit the child, not making the child fit the program, and assessing on a continuum that is different for each child, is a necessity. Most of us do not have the luxury of deciding who lands in our classroom each year or for how many years we will teach them, but we do have control over what takes place within our walls. If we have decided before students arrive in September what each one should know at the end of the school year vis a vis the mandated outcomes then we have shortchanged the gifted and handicapped the struggling student.

A multiage classroom thrives best when students are given some responsibility for peer tutoring. Over the three years they work within a true multiage classroom, each student has the opportunity to be the new student, the older returning student who can demonstrate

competencies, rules and routines to the new students, and the class seniors who share expertise with the other two groups. The tremendous benefits of such a process on the psycho social development of students has been well documented. Yet, even as the new student, they bring competencies which can be transferred in small group settings. Peer tutoring and recognition that each student brings unique strengths that can be shared with the group is a strategy that can be employed in any classroom.

For a split class to be successful it requires a certain level of independence afforded to, and on the part of the students. Routines, schedules and rules must be established and understood by the class so that there is no question as to what happens when individual or small group work is completed. Multiage philosophy recommends developing these rules and routines as a class so that students see their opinions are valued and respected. Rules designed together are more likely to be understood and followed, and if a multiage class is to work it depends on students taking the initiative to move on to other productive activities once their assigned work is completed. Routines and guidelines allow this to happen.

Similarly, adopting the multiage approach to curricular material also calls for individual choice, freedom, and guidelines. In a multiage classroom, themes or topics provide the jumping off point for cross curricular study. While the general topic comes from the mandated curriculum, each student selects a specific area for in-depth study which allows them to put into practice the skills required for each discipline in a way that is relevant to them. Again, this is something that can be accomplished in any classroom with some effort.

Multiage philosophy requires individualized programs delivered through cross curricular themed instruction. In the conclusions of the study, teachers expressed the need for assistance and training in areas of individualized instruction strategies and integrating themes over subject areas; two of the strategies they felt worked best in split classes. By getting to know your students strengths and weaknesses early in the new year, working with them to establish individual goals, and assessing them based on how they moved towards their individual goals you can more accurately determine if they have had growth in learning or just a good memory for facts.

From the study, high on the list of teacher strategies that work, and on the list for desired training, is the area of cooperative learning techniques and skills in group work. Multiage classrooms rely on students being grouped using various criteria including interests, ability and friendships. This is a valuable practice to adopt in any classroom whether for small group explicit instruction of a skill, for project work, or for cooperative learning. Volumes can be written on how and when to group, but each new class, each new theme, and each new skill will require unique groupings. If you have established criteria together in the first month for how group work is to be conducted, then making effective use of these strategies becomes much easier.

To have the kind of impact most teachers would like to achieve in a split grade classroom, or in a single grade room for that matter, will require doing things differently than what we have been doing. More importantly, it will require us to think differently about what we do. We have to recognize the importance of developing the whole child, not just the academic, and that the skills necessary to be successful in life, both social and academic, are what we should strive to nurture. We must also acknowledge that making the curriculum meaningful for each student is what we are mandated to do and not an occasional byproduct.

To quote the noted artist and illustrator Henry Hartman, "Success always comes when preparation meets opportunity." And our 'opportunity' may be closer than we think. We need to prepare ourselves for that 'dreaded' eventuality. The statistics and trends seem to indicate more split classes are coming to a room near you; maybe yours. Avoid the frustrations that can arise with teaching a multi-grade class. Investigate multiage classroom strategies while you have the chance to practice and incorporate them into your daily routine a little at a time before it becomes necessary. It can't help but improve your current practice and the overall school experience for your students.