SPLIT-GRADE CLASSES

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Abstract

This paper examines the roles various stakeholders must own in a program that includes split-grade classes in terms of teacher requirements, principal and parental support, as well as student selection. The research is limited in its scope. Various curriculum delivery strategies are explored: whole class, teacher-led, independent group work, self-directed and multimedia projects, based on practical experiences and lessons learned in the classroom. Finally, classroom management approaches are considered from the point of view of assistant teachers, routines and transitions, room equipment and use, tutoring, student assessment and evaluation.

Introduction

In 2003 I found myself assigned a split grade class, not having taught one for ten years! I was overwhelmed with the prospect, despite having already taught a grade 4/5 split in 1993. I looked back fondly on that year. There were 35 students, ten of whom were designated gifted and six were designated Learning Disabled. It was quite a challenge but the best year I had had up to that point in my teaching career. Having spent two of my previous years in a portable I know that there is a lot to learn from being outdoors.

My professional learning plan this year included examining the research to determine what I could learn from the literature. I knew, since I had been evaluated before, that I had to tackle this topic. It was a search to find information to assist me in creating an exemplary curriculum, despite the challenges of a high needs, diverse group. This is not an unusual situation, teaching a split-grade class. I am not alone. The Ottawa-Carleton District School Board in 2003 was made up of about 20% split-grade classes.

Context

First, I must define what I mean by a split-grade class. There are various definitions of split, multi-grade and multi-age classes. The scope of this article is about split- and multi-grade classes. The term "multi-age groupings" applies to carefully chosen programs, which combine more than one grade and, presumably, more than one age grouping in a classroom devoted to multimedia, creative, integrative curriculum. Curriculum may be delivered in a context of teaching cycles and students who remain with a teacher for several years. Resources abound in creating multi-grade groupings. A preliminary Google search found me 22,600! I was elated.

Split grade classes are formed quite often as an administrative solution, rather than for a philosophical motivation (Naylor, 2000). A principal will find that the school is assigned a finite number of teachers and must accommodate for such in the classrooms. The same is not true for multi-age groupings, in which it is the school philosophy to create alternate learning situations. This is profoundly different than the typical split grade class. We are limited in Ontario to teaching specific expectations to specific grades in most split grade classrooms with little room for maneuvering. Many teachers do not choose such an assignment, in that many multi-grade or split-grade classes are dictated by budgetary concerns.

Veenman (1995) speaks of dissatisfaction on the part of teachers with their lot in life. There is relatively little research available on split-grade classes. Much of the research I found failed to help me create the type of program I felt would be useful in my context. Most of the research focuses on multi-age groupings, rather than split-grade classes. In fact, Mason & Burns (1996)

disagree with the findings of Veenman. I was most disheartened. I felt that there must be some practical research I might apply to my situation.

Stakeholders

We could have a culture of change that is developed hand-in-hand with technical, human and resource support in our public schools but this not the case. These resources should be developed with all stakeholders, including teachers. Stakeholders include taxpayers, business, Federations, Government, teachers, parents and students. The Ministry of Education has undertaken a huge thrust in assisting school boards in developing Literacy Coach positions to create better curriculum. In addition, the stakeholders do not seem to add much to the equation. It is difficult to assuage concerned parent's concerns and many parents express concerns on a teacher's ability to differentiate program in the classroom. There is much a team could do to create a stronger curriculum. There are many exemplary strategies that can be applied to split grade classrooms.

Teacher Requirements

Teachers who are chosen for such opportunities must have a good handle on a variety of curriculum models and employ each as needs be. They must be prepared to juggle curriculum, resources and students. One must be positive and view every teaching experience as a learning process. Indeed, Bennett and Rolheiser (2001) conclude, "teaching effectively must be a creative act within a complex environment" (p. 15). The effective multi-grade teacher is creative, self-directed and has a portfolio of strategies to employ in a classroom which may prove demanding for some and frustrating for many. They must be organized, creative, compassionate and mindful of classroom discipline strategies. Teacher stress, a topic spoken of more often than not, is exacerbated by multi-grade classes of students who demand more time and energy when planning for twice the curriculum of a straight graded class. Teamwork is essential, since many split-grade classes must share precious learning resources in a single school setting. Team planning with colleagues will ensure that resources are easily available.

Teachers of split-grade classes must have a deep knowledge of pedagogy, human growth and development, behaviour, small group dynamics and, often, crowd control! First year teachers should not be assigned a split grade class, even though it appears that the vacancy list often includes such. Their professional portfolio must be full of knowledge about instructional concepts, organizers, strategies and skills and integrate these into thoughtful curriculum practices. They must be resourceful, creative, and energetic and must be mindful of their minds, bodies and souls so as not to burn out. At then end of the day they must be realistic about their time and energy and compromise and learn to say no when needed or necessary. This is only a job and it is not worth one's health in an attempt to please everybody (Jilks, 2003).

Principal Support

Principals must have experience and create some support for the classroom teacher. S/he must be prepared to advise the teacher in any capacity at any time. Huge issues often arise (parents displeased with the placement, access to materials and support, student misbehaviour, new students, unidentified special nees students), which further exacerbate the complexities of the class. The classroom teacher may need support redefining priorities, creating time for communication with parents, disciplining students and managing paperwork. The teacher can be offered more than simply moral support. Administrators can provide relief in terms of preparation time and workload by taking time to visit the class and offer to help out when discipline strategies require extra time and effort. This will significantly ease the burden and demonstrate concern. It is the principal who should be aware of resources available, such as the OCUP Planner (see: www.ocup.org/) which feature several multi-grade units of study.

Today's teachers face an increasingly complex student body that reflects diversity of cognitive, language and physical abilities that are affected by learning styles and brain functions. The multi-grade experience does not lend itself to making the job easier and principals must bear

these factors in mind when selecting staff for such an assignment. Teachers used to believe that being out of favour with one's principal meant to be assigned a split-grade class out in a portable! The variables over which we do not have control are vast. We have great student diversity in terms of advantages and disadvantages, family situations: socioeconomic status, emotional or physical abuse, student abilities and disabilities.

Add to this mix rigorous new academic expectations, standards, testing and technology and we can understand why many inexperienced teachers leave the flock. Statistics demonstrate how severe the problem has become. Teachers are being stretched to the limit and the expectations placed on them seem to be expanding dramatically (ETFO, 1999). Drope (2000) cites statistics that confirm this problem. In 1992 2.9 % of teachers were absent due to illness, by 1998 4.3 % were absent in a typical school week. Overworking teachers have taken on unhealthy weight gains, increased their smoking and alcohol consumption and face low self-esteem and marital conflict, as well as other psychological problems (Chisholm, 2000).

Parental Support
It is crucial that parents provide extra support for students and teachers. Many parents are wary of the opportunities for student creativity, independence and cooperative learning, which are embedded in a multi-grade class. Parents may need some handholding as they seek to find the best placement for their child. Studies show that students do not necessarily suffer due to multi-grade groupings. (Veenman, 1995) Researchers are not necessarily strident about this point since students tend to be hand-picked for these classes. Parents can come to understand that a great teacher can do anything and their children will not suffer in a split-grade class.

Parents need to be reminded that this placement choice for their child has been made in the child's best interests, and in the best interests of the entire school. The teaching style of a split-grade class can give a creative teacher a chance to incorporate and refine an instructional repertoire, if given access to support and resources. In the latest wave of educational reform we have identified exemplary practices worth adopting and parents can assist with home tutoring, time for peer tutoring, cooperative learning, thematic teaching, opportunities for curriculum review and time to progress to the next grade level. They can further assuage their concerns by volunteering in the classroom.

Student Selection
Students are usually chosen for a split-grade class because of their educational needs, academic ability, social, emotional and physical needs. Multi-grade classes must have a balanced representation of ages, genders, work habits and social skills. This information can be explained to concerned parents. Their child has been chosen! Much time may be spent in independent activities in a holistic, student-centered environment. This type of environment is ideally suited to such learners. They may thrive in a class in which there are opportunities for interaction with either older or younger students.

Curriculum Delivery
Whole class instruction, wait time, mind mapping, Venn diagrams, brain-based teaching strategies, teacher led activities, student-led projects, independent group work, self-directed learning, integrative and multimedia projects all have a place in the multi-grade class. Whatever works best for a particular subject and domain must be in the repertoire of the multi-grade classroom teacher and a place from which s/he may draw whatever works for the best. In *Beyond Monet*, Bennett and Rolheiser speak of the
> "Art and science of teaching". They cite the need to "integrate a deep
> understanding of knowledge, time to experiment, access to information; and
> opportunity to work within a system that supports novelty and creativity.
> "(2001, p.7)

It is the principal, the school and the school board that can best provide these supports. Teaching a split-grade class can be an opportunity for growth and fine tune instructional repertoire, skills, techniques, patterns and administrative practices.

Classroom Management

The management of the classroom has a profound effect on curriculum delivery. It helps any teacher and their delivery of program if they are organized, have clear-cut routines and transitions, fair but firm discipline practices. If they have adopted clear methods for evaluating and assessing student progress, including clear rubrics, they will find that curriculum management need not be an onerous task. Here are some of the instructional strategies I have assimilated into my split grade classroom.

Organization

The use of assistant teachers, room monitors and peer-tutoring are all intrinsic components of the well-administered classroom. Such strategies help the teacher and student have a common understanding of expectations for behaviour and help carry on the business of the room. The best evidence of this arrived on the day I was suddenly struck by a migraine. Various students took up attendance, did the calendar, sent for help from the office, and prepared the "To Do" list on the chalkboard, and began to take up homework using the Teacher Resource Book. Everyone knew what had to be done and all took part in completing tasks. Teachers must spend a few extra minutes organizing the management of equipment, creating checklists, especially during a thematic unit of study.

Routines and Transitions

A great deal of time can be spent moving from location and to new tasks. Transition times can be doubled in a split-grade class as students move from teaching areas to work areas. This time can be used well through teacher planning and room organization. A strategy such as count down to a start time artificially motivates students to get to where they need to be, especially when carried out with a sense of humour! A regular meeting spot for direct teaching times can relieve congestion and increase expectations of student responsibility. A familiar spot builds in the expectation that the teacher is busy with another grade and should not be disturbed except in the case of an emergency.

Discipline

Bolton (1996) lists some helpful tips and I based these quick tips upon her work.

1. Model the behaviours you expect from students. Treat them with respect, teach them how to disagree agreeably and value manners. It makes a busy classroom much easier to contain. (Bianco, 2002)
2. Modify assignments according to student learning styles.
3. Do not take student behaviour personally: remain calm, fair and firm.
4. Establish a time out area, (Principal support is essential here!) Sometimes all you need is a break.
5. Provide children with choices. Give them the choice of topic, presentation method or style. Units are a simple way to scaffold learning. www.jilks.com/portfolio/mediaunit.htm
6. Make student responsible for work and then have them do the marking. We exchange papers and mark each other's work quickly as a group. Make the first done the person who does the marking for that assignment.
7. Create logical consequences for inappropriate behaviour.
8. Allow children to share of themselves i.e. "bring and brag"! Let them know that you are human, too.
9. Teach the appropriate expression of feelings and interaction strategies. Do not accept rudeness. I teach students to disagree agreeably. "I disagree with that answer." Rather than students correcting each other I suggest they say, "I have another suggestion".
10. Seat needy children near to you and away from potentially disruptive students.
11. Play music during work periods. Music soothes the frustrated souls!
12. Ensure that students have opportunities for success, however limited. Modify the depth and breadth of their assignments.
13. When you feel overwhelmed get support. Phone a friend or find a mentor. Simplify.

Student Evaluation and Assessment

Tracking of skill development and collection of materials for student assessment is of prime importance. Brent Philips, of the Halton District School Board has created easy to use grids www.geocities.com/Athens/Oracle/8314/currgrid.htm that simplify the evaluation process. This Powerpoint highlights some things to keep in mind: www.jilks.com/articles/Assessment.htm.

Two separate locations for a hand-in box for each grade help to sort out student's work. Collecting only one grade's work per day minimizes confusion and apparently lessens the work load in that marking half a class set of books or papers seems less onerous than collecting a set of papers which must first be sorted. Another strategy I use is to assign tests to a particular grade during alternate weeks or on alternate days.

I like to use thematic topics of study, as the line between one grade and ages and stages, learning needs and learning styles blur another. I use novel studies that anyone can belong to, I choose no more than four books and students choose one of them. The learning tasks are contained on my web site. Usually we use one spelling list derived from our science units of study. I give a pretest and assign various activities during the week. Students choose a goal for the final test at the end of the week. This is the spelling master list we use. www.jilks.com/portfolio/spelling.html Student take ownership and often can choose spelling activities which suit their learning styles. This is an empowering process.

We do a lot of group marking in our class. Often we simply exchange work with a neighbour. At other times when it comes time to assess or evaluate I strategically give students of higher abilities a paper that they may be able to provide some insight into improvements. Alternately, students who have been having trouble with work may find that seeing what a strong piece of work looks like may give them a notion of exemplary work. Students help me create rubrics for expectations before, during or after the activity and this provides them with a goal. As we mark we discuss what the various level answers look like and increases.

Self- marking works in my class and seems to improve motivation by making students accountable. I leave the marking book out and the first student in a cooperative learning group, usually a strong, independent worker, will go to the Teacher Guide, correct the first ten questions and go back to his/her group to mark them. This saves me time, it points out who has mastered the work and invites students to peer-tutor as they peer mark a piece of work. They seem keen to help others understand the finer points of regrouping, or measurement or borrowing and can often point out small errors privately (without losing face in front of the teacher) which enables the students to successfully complete work. Sometimes they are unable to help one another and will quietly come to me and suggest that their peer needs help. I am amazed at their compassion and concern.

Of course, it is the performance-based assessment tasks, which we use most often. Students choose a project, we approach it in a constructivist manner, and they construct a multi-media presentation, which reflects their knowledge and understanding on a particular topic.

Conclusions

I work at building a cooperative classroom community in which the goals is for us all to move to master the curriculum expectations. I have found that often it is a student who exhibits behaviour problems who relishes opportunities to quickly complete and survey peer work. They like the responsibility. It keeps them motivated to finish early and take responsibility. They save face when they can quietly correct work, without interference from me, they peer-tutor each other and the dynamics of the learning process changes at that point. They are in charge of marking and can affix stickers and are thus empowered to become assistant teachers. It is very seldom that students cheat during these opportunities and it has proven to be a valuable strategy for me to use.

Split-grade classes have been challenging and yet the rewards are great. To see peers working with one another restores my faith in humanity. My dreams for my students are to see them

working with each other in a cooperative, creative learning environment. Some of these strategies can help. There are many resources available and most teachers are quite eager to share their knowledge and expertise. Learning Resource teachers can provide valuable insight into student needs. With the support of principals, literacy coaches and other stakeholders, the lessons you learn as a teacher far outweigh the difficulties. It is up to stakeholders to make sure that all of these resources are easily accessed. This varies incredibly from Board to Board. Participation in professional development activities are crucial if we are to assist students in split grade classes in becoming lifelong learners. It is possible that they will learn more from the opportunities provided in such a situation.

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