The Advantages of a Multi-grade Classroom

One- or two-room schoolhouse. The one-room schoolhouse offered certain attributes that were very sound educationally. First of all, children remained with the same teacher and primarily the same class of students for multiple years. School was a stable, reliable environment for the children. Second, the mix of ages and abilities provided optimum opportunities for student collaboration as older students served as role models. There was no apparent ceiling on the content taught, discussed, or overheard with the room, which benefited older students by design and younger students more incidentally.

If multi-grade classrooms are so beneficial, why the shift to single-grade classrooms? The answer may shock you: mass production. The concept of single-graded classrooms actually began in 1848 in industrialized Massachusetts as a way to “educate more children for less money.” In other words, the students’ welfare was not the foremost reason when an “assembly-line concept” of education entered the classroom. The practice of our present system of single-graded classrooms did not evolve from any research base… but it evolved and became a deeply ingrained tradition more by accident and economics.

Economic concerns affecting classrooms in the 1850’s are still weighing on classrooms today. “One major reason people find it plausible that schools are inadequately funded is that they know many schools aren’t performing well…. There are factors besides spending that contribute to school performance… [The sooner] Americans realize that schools… would not perform substantially better if they had more money… the sooner we can have a productive debate on how to make the system work better.”

Interestingly, this modern research is leading educators to employ teaching methodology that is inherent to a multi-grade classroom. “The more we learned about multi-grade classrooms, the more we realized that grouping children like a family is a more logical and humane way to raise children, educationally speaking… And frankly, we are highly impressed with the effect the family-grouped classroom had upon our at-risk learners, our gifted learners…our late bloomers and everyone in between. Could this be a model within the realm of human existence? Families are the children’s first and foremost learning area, are they not?”

And as a Bible-believing people, we know what the LORD has taught us about the important role families have in time and eternity.

Cross of Glory… Where past blessings are building a great future.
A multi-grade classroom can offer benefits not easily replicated in a single-grade classroom.

Why Is the Family Environment Beneficial?

The Biblical concept of a family learning environment is applauded by secular research. Consider these endorsements:

- “The US Government reports: “Research evidence indicates that multi-grade instruction has a significant positive impact on student attitudes, and tends to enhance achievement outcomes under positive implementation conditions.”

- “Collective reports [on the multi-grade classroom] show a recognizable pattern. Studies show that children in multi-age or family-grouped models score either similarly or better academically than their comparison peers in traditionally-grouped classes. For example, some reports showed that multi-aged groups scored more favorably, at least at some age levels, than did other children… When it comes to student affect [i.e. social relationships and attitudes] the case for multi-grade organization appears much stronger. Of the 21 separate measures used to assess student affect in the studies reviewed, 81 percent favored the multi-grade classrooms.”

- “Research evidence indicates that multi-grade instruction has a significant positive impact on student attitudes, and tends to enhance achievement outcomes under positive implementation conditions.”

- “When it comes to student affect [i.e. social relationships and attitudes] the case for multi-grade organization appears much stronger. Of the 21 separate measures used to assess student affect in the studies reviewed, 81 percent favored the multi-grade classrooms.”

What About Academic Benefits?

When children are excelling socially in a classroom, the environment has been created for academic achievement. Consider these endorsements for the multi-age classroom:

- “When the many aspects of a multi-grade classroom are weighed as a whole, researchers observe a beneficial pattern. This has prompted one researcher to ask: "If this is the case, why then do we not have more schools organized into multi-grade classrooms?"”

- “This author answers his own question by pointing out that it is because "most teachers have been trained to work in single-grade classrooms…[so that the]…skills needed to be effective [are] simply not part of their prior training and experience.”

However, this is where the WELS is different. Because our WELS Synod has a long experience in graduating teachers equipped to teach in multi-grade classrooms, our WELS teachers can maximize the advantages of a multi-grade classroom.

The Blessings of WELS Schools

The WELS private school system (i.e. parochial, or church operated schools) is the fourth largest private school system in America, operating more than 350 schools nationwide. We have been blessed with experience: WELS congregations have operated elementary schools for over 150 years. In addition, the WELS Institute has developed and maintains a strong support system for WELS schools and teachers. Since our teachers may be called to serve in a wide variety of settings, from large schools in the city to small schools operated by a rural congregation, WELS teachers are graduated uniquely equipped to teach in multi-grade classrooms.

WELS teachers can maximize the advantages of a multi-grade classroom.

End notes

2 Kasten and Clark, p. 6
5 Kasten and Clark, p. vi
6 Refer to Bible passages such as Genesis 2:18-24, Psalm 78, Proverbs 1:3,5,8,9, Ephesians 6:4, Colossians 3:20.
7 Colleen Polito and Anne Davies, Multi-Age and More (Winnipeg: Pegius Publishers, 1994) p. 8
8 Jill Ostrum, A Room with a Different View (Stenhouse Publishers, 1995) p. 4
12 Kasten and Clark, p. 15-16
13 Miller, www.thememoryhole.org/edu/eric/ed335178