

MULTI-GRADE TEACHING

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This paper considers some popular strategies for multi-grade teaching with commentary on their strengths and weaknesses.

1. The **INDIVIDUAL WORKCARD** or **WORKBOOK** model.

Method: The teacher writes instructions for things that the children must do on a set of cards. The children read the card and do the work. When they have finished the teacher marks their work and gives them another card to do.

The children work through the cards, often alone, sometimes in pairs or perhaps in small groups.

By writing different sets of cards for each grade -children can be given an appropriate card for the age group they are in.

Problems: This takes a long time to set up as the teacher has to write everything that every child will need to do during each day, each week and each term for the year. But once this has been done teaching is relatively easy -just sit back and hand out the cards.

The **WORKBOOK** model is even easier. Just hand out the workbooks that have been written for the grades in the class -ask the children to turn to which ever page they were working on last and carry on from there.

This sounds very simple -so where is the problem?

It is at this point that we must consider what the job of a teacher is. And I would answer that question by saying that a teacher's job is to teach!

The biggest problem with the workbook or workcard model is that it gives very little opportunity for actual teaching. The teacher becomes a manager dealing with simple, low-level administrative problems such as finding the next card.

The children must attempt to teach themselves. They read the instructions on the card or in the book and complete the exercises. If they do not understand, they go and ask. Queues form around the teacher who has only a few seconds for each child to give a word of advice here and there. And each child comes with a different card and a

different problem, so there is no continuity of teaching or opportunity to expand on explanation for the benefit of a wider audience.

The only time that a teacher knows that a child has a real problem is when they come with finished work that is all wrong. This is the worst form of teaching, where children are exposed continuously to failure.

Where is the enthusiasm to get involved with work? The children must try to motivate themselves, working at their own pace -or perhaps not working at all, The actual contact time with their teacher may be reduced to a few seconds a day.

There is a considerable body of opinion to suggest that the most effective teaching comes from frequent, direct interaction with children. Ofsted, the office for standards in education in England, has identified 'too much individualisation of work' as a characteristic of low-achieving classrooms. The British National Numeracy Project suggests that 'better numeracy standards occur where teachers devote a high proportion of lesson direct teaching'.

But how can a teacher actively teach more than one grade at a time?

HOLDING ACTIVITIES

Method: Where there are two or more different grades in the teacher plans the day as a series of lessons for each grade, plus a series of holding activities.

While the teacher is teaching one grade, the other children are given something to get on with that will not need the teacher's direct involvement. This is called a holding activity -some simple but usually enjoyable task to keep them busy, to keep them quiet and occupied until it is their turn for a lesson with their teacher.

For example, while the teacher is working with one grade on mathematics, children from another grade may be sketching or painting a picture, or perhaps engaging in paired reading or some similar activity.

When the maths lesson is over, the two groups change places. The maths group work on some holding activities while the others have their maths lesson, or whatever .

In this way, for at least half of every day each child benefits from direct interaction with their teacher on high level and demanding learning tasks. Half a day is far better than none.

Problems: Problems can arise with the group on the holding activity. Unless it is particularly simple, children will inevitably want some help or guidance from their teacher.

There is also the problem of supervision. Should the group remain in the classroom, where they may be distracted by the lesson going on where they may distract the children working with the teacher.

If they are sent to work outside who looks after them and makes sure that no one comes to any harm or gets in to any kind of mischief?

One possible solution is to use a classroom assistant.

In some countries it is possible to employ assistants. These are not teachers but they are responsible adults with an interest in education whose job is to work with the teacher by supervising groups working on other activities, while the teacher is working directly with another group of children,

In some schools this is done by using unpaid adult volunteers -often a willing parent of one of the children in the class. They play a very important role but it is important to remember that these volunteers are not teachers.

With the holding activity system the teacher maintains total control over the content of all the activities and lessons. The assistant is only there to help support the teacher, not take their place.

2a: Combining 1 and 2

There are two compelling arguments to support the use of workcards and workbooks, The first is in those situations where children find themselves with no teacher at all. This is an all too frequent occurrence in some countries (particularly emerging nations). It is far better that a child has some well-produced workcards or a workbook that they can use in a situation where no teacher is present than to sit for long periods with nothing to do at all.

The second is to use workcards or workbooks as the basis of the holding activity described in 2 above.

3. STAGGERED START

This is exactly as it sounds. The teacher begins by teaching the first

pupils, then, while they are busy on some related activity, the teacher begins work with the second group.

Usually the lessons are from the same subject, such as language teaching, science or mathematics, but this is not essential.

For example, the teacher introduces a new mathematics concept to children from one grade. Perhaps it is measurement, using a ruler. Once the children have understood how to use their rulers to measure various objects.

While they are busy doing this, the teacher can turn his or her attention to the children in the second grade and work on a different maths concept with them - for example addition with carrying.

The teacher can then set some exercises for the second group to complete while he or she goes back to the first group and discusses with them what they have done. (The use of workbooks or workcards to support the direct teaching is quite appropriate in this context).

While the group write up their findings following discussion of work completed, the teacher goes back to group two to check on their progress on the written examples for addition.

Both groups benefit from direct teaching and both have an opportunity to their new found knowledge in some practical way, with time at the end to discuss and consolidate what they have done.

This requires good lesson planning and preparation, but has been shown to be a successful model in practice.

And it is a model that can also benefit from the use of a classroom assistant or volunteer to oversee the work of each group during the practical activity or work stage.

There is a further adaptation of this model, which requires very skilful lesson planning and careful adaptation of the syllabus for each grade in the subject being taught. The idea is to teach the same concept to all the children- but teach it at different levels simultaneously.

4. DIFFERENTIATED DIRECT TEACHING

Let us consider a typical lesson plan. The lesson begins with a few minutes revision of previous work or some mental maths work to get the children thinking about and using the concepts and skills they will need for the lesson itself. The teacher then explains the aim of the lesson and introduces the work through direct teaching, discussing the mathematics involved, using appropriate examples and involving the children through questions and answers.

The lesson proceeds to a practical session where the children get to use concepts for themselves. This can be through worked examples, or some form of practical investigation or even a game for groups to play.

The teacher uses this time to visit individuals and groups to check on their progress, assess their understanding and provide support for slower learners or extension activities and challenges for those who are faster learners.

The lesson ends with some form of consolidation where children can show and discuss what they have been doing to reinforce the concepts in children's minds and celebrate individual achievement.

A teacher who is extremely well prepared and knowledgeable on his or her subject matter can organise such a lesson to meet every child's needs in a multi-grade class, at a level appropriate to each child's age and stage of learning.

For example, the few minutes of revision and practice at the start can be sufficiently broad in scope to encompass the levels of understanding of all the pupils.

The teacher can direct harder and more demanding questions at older or more able pupils, and ask less demanding and more supportive questions of slower learners and pupils with lower levels of knowledge and understanding. In this way every child can enjoy success in answering questions at their level and make some contribution to the start of the lesson.

The lesson itself can begin with a common introduction. For example, the lesson may be about using notes and coins in simple transactions.

The teacher can describe a shopping trip and show some items that have been bought—a bag full of boxes and packets would make a good visual stimulus.

He or she can give the cost of each item and ask various individuals or groups in the class to say what combinations of coins and notes could be given for that amount of money.

By varying the costs and directing the questions to appropriate groups all children can be fully involved.

The teacher can then introduce some games or activities or practical problems and investigations, based on the giving and receiving of correct sums of money.

For example, children may be using coins at grade 2 and coins and notes at grade 3, or whatever is appropriate as determined by the school curriculum.

While the groups are occupied on their tasks, the teacher can visit the groups and discuss the work with the children, supporting and extending as described previously.

Such a model of teaching can, and perhaps should, be adopted by every teacher as it is a means by which children of very different levels of ability and understanding, even within just one grade, can be successfully taught at a level that is appropriate to their individual need. This a multi-level technique that is equally applicable to a multi-grade situation.

The problem with this approach in terms of multi-grade teaching is that many syllabi are written grade by grade, rather than concept by concept. Many schemes are not written with the multi-grade teacher in mind and fail to give appropriate progression of concepts in a way that is easy to follow.

If such a model is to be proposed to teachers then there must be great flexibility in the way in which teachers are required to teach programmes of study exploit progression of concepts.

The aim of this brief paper is not to cover every possible model of multi-grade teaching but to raise issues that need to be addressed if multi-grade teaching is to be tackled successfully.

For example, some models are very demanding in terms of preparation time.

Can this be done for teachers by working parties who write suggested lesson plans to aid multi-grade teaching?

Should curriculum developers and policy makers ensure that the needs of multi- grade teachers are met in full by the production of appropriate curricula that acknowledge the needs of pupils and teachers in multi-grade classes?

Is there some mechanism by which schools that are required to adopt multi-grade teaching can be given an additional allowance to recruit classroom assistants?

Can class sizes be guaranteed to be at the recommended level? It is certainly extremely difficult to tackle the problem of multi-grade teaching with classes larger than say 30 to 35 pupils.

If multi-grade teaching becomes a requirement of teachers in any system. It is reasonable for teachers to expect that the system will provide all possible support and training. Something that is sadly frequently lacking.

The matters outlined here do need to be addressed, and solutions to the questions raised will need to be found if children are to benefit from the quality of learning experience that they rightly deserve.

And that is the bottom line. Those who are in the business of education are there for one reason only -and that is to ensure that every child receives an education of the highest possible standard, regardless of gender, religion or social position. And regardless of the

fact that they are probably one of the millions of children world-wide who live in poor, rural communities where multi-grade teaching is necessary because of a lack of teaching staff.

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