

# The Advantages of a Multigrade Classroom

Most of us today are accustomed to a classroom of students who are all in the same grade. This is called a single-grade classroom. When a teacher teaches a classroom of students of different ages and grade levels, this is called a multigrade classroom. Zion Lutheran School teaches in a multigrade setting. We divide our school into a K5 classroom, grades 1-2, grades 3-4, grades 5-6, and grades 7-8.

When some hear that we are offering multigrade classrooms, this may catch them off-guard. But it ought to win their keen attention because a multigrade classroom can offer benefits not easily replicated in a single-grade classroom. To explain these benefits (supported by research) is the purpose of this article.

## The Shift in Classroom Structure— This May Surprise You!

Which nation boasts the highest literacy rate in the world? It's New Zealand, a nation where multigrade classrooms are common today, just as they once were in America.<sup>1</sup> "Rural America has its own history of multi-age one-room or two-room schoolhouses. 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."<sup>1</sup>

If multigrade 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."<sup>2</sup> 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."<sup>2</sup>

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."<sup>3</sup>

This productive debate is best supported by research. Modern research into how students learn has exponentially multiplied in recent years. "Now that we have the scientific knowledge and empirical evidence to document the major differences in anatomical structure, neurological development, and the chemical and hormonal climate in developing boys and girls, we can innovate and sustain [the] educational techniques that bring the greatest benefit to all our children..."<sup>4</sup>

Interestingly, this modern research is leading educators to employ teaching methodology that is inherent to a multigrade classroom. —The more we learned [about multigrade 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. Does that sound too good to be true? Think for a minute. Isn't family the oldest, most time tested, most successful model within the realm of human existence? Families are the children's first and foremost learning area, are they not?"<sup>5</sup> And as a Bible believing people, we know what the LORD has taught us about the important role family has in time and eternity.<sup>6</sup>

## Why Is the Family Environment Beneficial?

- The Biblical concept of a family learning environment is applauded by secular research. Consider these endorsements: "Multi-age classes are sometimes called family groupings. Just as family gains strength from the range of talents and interests of its members, the multiage class is enriched."<sup>7</sup>
- "Multi-aged classrooms, especially those ... that span four years, demonstrate what children are able to do. They also break down barriers of age and gender. (First-grade girls actually invite third-grade boys to their birthday parties, not a usual occurrence in a straight grade). The children learn to respect each other as individuals, not according to age or grade level."<sup>8</sup>
- "When it comes to student affect [i.e. social relationships and attitudes] the case for multigrade organization appears much stronger. Of the 21 separate measures used to assess student affect in the studies reviewed, 81 percent favored the multigrade classrooms?"<sup>9</sup>

- Studies indicate that younger children actively use older children to develop skills and to acquire knowledge while older children actively assert responsibility for younger ones and develop an increasingly sophisticated understanding of that responsibility. Age mixing provides opportunities for children to find others of matching abilities.<sup>10</sup>
- The US Government reports: “Research evidence indicates that multigrade instruction has significant positive impact on student attitudes, and tends to enhance achievement outcomes under positive implementation conditions.”<sup>11</sup> “Collective reports [on the multigrade classroom] show a recognizable pattern. Studies show that children in multiage 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 grouped children scored more favorably, at least at some age levels, than did other children...Within some of the reports, children in the family-grouped models scored better in certain verbal skills, whether these skills were reading, vocabulary, or other language-related skills.”<sup>12</sup>

A word of caution is probably wise at this point. —It should be noted that standardized tests are a quantitative rather than a qualitative assessment. This is not to say they are not valuable, only that the value should be tempered with the tests’ inherent limitations”<sup>12</sup>. In other words, the above, glowing results are not provided here as an attempt to prove that a multigrade classroom magically produces higher achievers than a single-graded classroom. Rather this information is provided to demonstrate that students in a multigrade classroom are not at a disadvantage — an unfounded fear often felt by parents not familiar with multigrade classrooms.

When the many aspects of a multigrade 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 multigrade classrooms?”<sup>13</sup> 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] ...the skills needed to be effective [are] simply not part of their prior training and experience.”<sup>13</sup> However, this is where the WELS is different. Because our WELS Synod has a long experience in graduating teachers equipped to teach in multigrade classrooms, our WELS teachers can maximize the advantages of a multigrade 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 has developed and maintain 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 multigrade classrooms.

We are grateful in our Savior Jesus to be able to offer a great education in multigrade classrooms. Please feel free to speak to our staff about any questions you may have about our school.

### End notes

1. Wendy C Kasten and Barbara K Clark, *The Multi-Age Classroom: A Family of Learners* (New York: Richard C. Owen Publishers, 1993) p. 5
2. Kasten and Clark, p. 6
3. Jay P. Greene, *Education Myths* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005) p. 9 & 19
4. Michael Gurian, *Boys and Girls Learn Differently!* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishing, 2001) p. 314
5. Kastens and Clark, p. vii
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 Politano and Anne Davies, *Multi-Age and More* (Winnipeg: Pegius Publishers, 1994) p. 4
8. Jill Ostrow, *A Room with a Different View* (Stenhouse Publishers, 1995) p. 4
9. Bruce Miller, *Teaching and Learning In the Multigrade Classroom: Student Performance and Instructional Routines* (Charleston, WV: ERIC Clearinghouse of Rural Education and Small Schools, 1991) accessed at [www.thememoryhole.org/edu/eric/ed335178.html](http://www.thememoryhole.org/edu/eric/ed335178.html) (6/15/2006).
10. J Feldman and P Gray, *Some Educational Benefits of Freely Chosen Age Mixing Among Children and Adolescents*. Phi Delta Kappa Vol. 80, No. 7, 507-512 (1999). as quoted by Charlie Naylor, *Split-Grade and Multi-Age Classes: A Review of the Research and a Consideration of the B.C. Context* (January 2000) accessed at [www.bctf.ca/publications/ Re-search Reports/2000ei02/report.html](http://www.bctf.ca/publications/Re-search/Reports/2000ei02/report.html) (6/15/2006).
11. *Improving Multigrade Classroom Instruction in Small, Rural Schools, A Series of Workshops for Educators Inter-ested in Multigraded Classroom Instruction, Tried and True: September 1997 publication*, accessed at [http:// www.ed.gov/pubs/triedandtrue/improve.html](http://www.ed.gov/pubs/triedandtrue/improve.html) (7/1/2011).
12. Kasten and Clark, p.15-16
13. Miller, [www.thememoryhole.org/edu/eric/ed335178](http://www.thememoryhole.org/edu/eric/ed335178)
14. Statistics from [wels.net](http://wels.net)

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