

CONSIDERING THE COMMUNITY CLASSROOM

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Abstract

This is a discussion article that focuses on the limitations of the single-grade classroom in the traditional public school system. It reviews the benefits of the mixed age classroom that can be seen in alternative education settings. These benefits are both academic and social, as mixed-age classrooms allow for role-modeling in both of these arenas. It explores the various international examples of school systems that use mixed-age classrooms with high levels of academic success, as well as discussing the development of the current school system and how it fails to serve the needs of modern students.

Introduction

The elementary classroom is at a precarious point. With implementation of Common Core State Standards in many states, much higher learning targets and expectations and budget

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woes, teachers struggle with how to make expected progress with students. The expectations are much higher, yet the problems remain the same: too many students with drastically different ability levels, not enough time, and not enough resources. With a system that struggled to meet the previous expectations, the question becomes: how will these new expectations be met with that same system in place? At some point, “thinking outside of the box” and looking for schools and methods that succeed with a different approach needs to be considered.

In addition to academic hurdles, elementary schools also struggle with when to teach valuable social lessons. If there is not enough time in the day to teach reading and math, how do we make time for things like anti-bullying curriculum, explicitly teaching social skills, shoe tying, etc.? These are skills students use their entire lives, and there is a precious formative window of instruction, yet the question continues to be a matter of minutes.

Even more concerning becomes the matter of interventions. Many teachers will express that teaching to a student’s age is as arbitrary as teaching to their shoe size. Public education, with best of intent, has urgently tried to saturate the grade-level classroom with interventions to address the different needs of the students: Special education, ELL services, reading groups, math groups, double doses of literacy and math, pull out, push in, etc. However the foundation of “teaching to the middle” still remains the same, and the rapidly disappearing supports and interventions are simply not enough to make this model effective. The basis of public education has been to cover the mandated curriculum and standards, and many students are simply left behind due to lagging skills (especially those that have low skills but do not qualify for services).

So what is the answer? How do we create more time? How do we create interventions in the classroom that serves a huge range of student abilities? If our current model is ineffective,

then perhaps it is time to consider a structural change. When highly-rated elementary schools in Oregon are examined something interesting becomes evident: some examples of very small, rural elementary schools that preform highly on state measures (www.ode.state.or.us/home/). If you pull this data further, you will find this to be true even when considering the population has the same hurdles seen in schools across the state, such as poverty and limited resources (www.ode.state.or.us/home/). However, with extremely small populations the inability to support single-grade level instruction creates far more mixed-grade settings than in traditional schools.

Consider mixed grades further: Alternative methods of instruction, some with decades of success such as Montessori, Waldorf, and Whole Schooling, are built on a foundation of mixing ages, for academic and social reasons. Additionally, self-contained special education and alternative education classrooms are generally blended ages, and instruction is based on the students' ability, not age. This system is in place because it is accepted that the students in these programs vary widely in ability, however we see that in general education classrooms as well. Another benefit seen in these settings is the sense of community and accountability among students, which allows students to build social skills in a manner which cannot be replicated when students are only in a single-grade group.

Why is the multiage classroom effective? What are the benefits? Is it time to reconsider our classrooms? For this article the advantages of the multiage classroom will be presented as a potential remedy for many of the hurdles facing the traditional single-grade classroom. These include: The amount of transitions, training, assessments and other time-consuming tasks that occur in the traditional single-grade classroom, curriculum advantages to the multiage classroom,

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the success of mixed-grade philosophies in the past, the success of current multiage charter schools and rural schools, and the social advantages to the multiage classroom.

Transitions, Training, Assessments and Other Time Wasters

Speaking with elementary school teachers during the start of the year will reveal that they spend an enormous amount of time at the start of the year training students and establishing a routine. Although school districts stress the importance of “teaching bell to bell” to maximize instruction time, the truth is that much of this time is lost to transitions. The younger the students, the longer transitions often take. Additionally, large class sizes make these transitions even more challenging. One system common in public schools to address this issue is “looping”, where a teacher stays with a class for a number of years so they are used to class routines. How can this idea be expanded?

Drawing on the limited examples of teachers in multiage classrooms in the United States, the start of the year is referenced as a major advantage to this system. In one K-3 multiage class teachers saw a huge improvement on the first 6 weeks because they only had to focus on training the new students, and students that had been in the classroom previously were able to help orient the new students (Fu, Hartle, Lamme, Copenhaver, Adams, Harmon & Reneke, 1999). Teachers also already knew and had built relationships with the students and families, so the trust and motivation was already present in the classroom. Teachers had a deeper understanding of their students and their learning styles. Students also felt less anxiety, because many were not adjusting to a new teacher and peers.

Moving thirty or more students to change their focus is difficult, especially with varying degrees of engagement in the activity. Also because students work at different paces, the

problem continues to be what happens with early finishers? Late finishers? Non-completers?

When students finish early this often becomes a time that is difficult for classroom management as students look for other ways to occupy their time. This can also be true for students that have skills that are too low to complete the expected activity, and simply choose not to participate.

The structure of the multiage classroom is very different. The “sage on the stage” approach to instruction simply does not work in this setting. Teachers need to make the shift from “teaching curriculum to teaching children” (Krockover, 1999), as the learner becomes the center of the classroom. Generally in this setting there are some whole group activities to build community, teacher-led groups for skills and assessment, student-led groups for supported practice, and dyads for mentoring and tutoring. This all takes place simultaneously in the classroom. There are very few instances where the entire group goes from one activity to another, which is a tremendous source of wasted time in the traditional classroom. As students finish an activity they are directed to the next one, without having to wait for others to finish. In this setting it is accepted that students have different paces and need different levels of assistance, and the structure allows for that to happen efficiently.

Curriculum Advantages

Structurally, the multiage classroom offers some advantages, although it requires a major shift in teaching. Academically, there are advantages to this method as well. For one, the natural grouping of ages allows for peer modeling (Stuart, 2006). It also allows for flexible grouping and student-led interest groups and shared task groups (Hoffman, 2002). It allows for peer teaching, which enables younger students to learn from older students (directly or through observation), and, through teaching, older students can solidify their own learning (Carter, 2005).

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It also allows for more authentic assessments, since activities are more task-oriented (Stuart, 2006).

In terms of inclusion, the multiage classroom is an ideal setting. Rather than bringing in resources, the flexibility of grouping allows students to work at their level, thus providing a more supported environment for students in special education or those that simply struggle academically (Stuart, 2006). It allows for modification and accommodations for students that would be far more difficult to provide in a traditional classroom setting. In traditional education, there is a huge hesitancy to retain students or teach them below their age-level, however the result is often students are pushed along the curriculum without the foundation of skills they need to move on. In traditional schools, it is difficult to pause whole-group instruction to do instructional interventions for students. This is especially pertinent for students that lag behind in literacy, which makes any other material virtually inaccessible, yet they are pushed to continue.

Data on multiage classrooms is difficult to decipher (Ong, 2000). Depending on the situation, multiage classrooms can show benefits to reading, writing and math or data can be unclear when multiage classrooms are developed as a “solution” to an unstable distribution of a student population without changing teaching methods (Ong, 2000). The important consideration is that teaching and the whole approach to the classroom has to change, delivering traditional instruction in a multiage classroom is a recipe for disaster.

Alternative Methods and Philosophies

There are several methodologies in education that support the multiage classroom, although they are far more common in private schools. The Montessori method groups students

in classrooms by three year intervals, with a focus on students doing work until they demonstrate mastery (Cossentino, 2006). Waldorf schools also focus on a community approach to the classroom with an emphasis on teaching students to collaborate and learn to help and support each other to build social skills (Chauncey, 2006). Whole Schooling is a more recent movement that also focuses on building a classroom community that serves a diverse range of student needs (without pulling out students for any kinds of services or interventions) and that stresses teaching students to collaborate (Peterson & Taylor, 2009).

Unfortunately, schools using these methods and philosophies are generally private, and it is difficult to compare and track that data with public schools. However, the structure in all cases do allow for the teacher to serve a wide range of student needs and address teaching social skills. Again, in order to do so effectively, a major paradigm shift is required in the role of the teacher.

Rural Schools

In the state of Oregon there are some excellent examples of rural “community” schools that use multiage education with surprising results. For example, the Burnt River School with just 87 students demonstrates state test scores and attendance rates that outscore the state average considerably. This is despite a having a significant portion of their population designated as “economically disadvantaged” (retrieved from Oregon Department of Education website : <http://www.ode.state.or.us/home/>). Fields Elementary and Frenchglen Elementary, both with populations under 20 students K-5 also demonstrate excellent test scores and attendance rates well above state averages, although both have two teachers for their entire mixed age population (retrieved from Harney County website: <http://www.harneycounty.com/education.html>). The list

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does not stop there. Big Muddy Elementary in Jefferson County shows similar results, as does Evergreen Elementary in Silver Falls SD (<http://www.ode.state.or.us/home/>). All of these schools mix ages to a greater degree than traditional elementary schools and have a focus on school community. Their success is not new; these schools have steady track records. While it is difficult to compare these community schools with large urban schools, their success begs the question if mixed-ages classrooms should be considered in a larger context.

Charter Schools

Recent charter school laws have allowed a host of schools to use multiage classrooms. In Oregon alone there are a number of examples of multiage classrooms and philosophies: Alliance Charter Academy, City View School, Community Roots Montessori, The Ivy School, Lewis and Clark Montessori, Molalla River Academy and Ridgeline Montessori (<http://www.ode.state.or.us/home/>) to name a few. The boom in multiage classrooms developed through charter schools may point to a deficiency seen in traditional classroom models.

Community, Bullying and the Multiage Class

Children love to “be big”. They want to be a “big kid”, they want to act older. They naturally look up to older children and want to emulate them. This can be very good or very bad. The secret is to bring positive role-modeling, in a variety of contexts, into the classroom. While we often talk to older students about “being good role models”, and being examples, we often do it during the reflection of a negative event. In the traditional system, we rarely have opportunities to use role-modeling in an academic setting, because students only mix during lunches and recess. Consider the implication of the blended classroom: not only do students see positive behaviors, they also have the opportunity to see older students doing challenging work,

use more sophisticated vocabulary (Kappler & Roelke, 2002), and to learn classroom routines from students that are already savvy. The younger children have daily examples of how to act mature and do well academically. Those who are socially and academically able can work up to higher levels and work with older children. Those who need to work at lower levels and do well with younger peers also have that ability. This is also the chance to learn about community: in reality we are not separated by age. In the community, ages mix at the park, the home, and any other setting except school. Learning to work with students and people of different ages is a life skill, yet it is rarely taught. Teaching older students to be aware of younger students' needs teaches them patience and caution. Teaching younger children how to ask older children for help and watch them for positive examples teaches them to be self-advocates. In observations of multiage classrooms, students are far more likely to choose a child of a different age to work with when given a choice (Stone & Christie, 1996).

Consider bullying. Where are the places that elementary bullying is prevalent? The playground, buses and lunch. These are generally the only times that ages mix in traditional elementary schools. This would seem contradictory, since advocating for mixed ages in order to help students work together would seem to indicate that they would learn these skills during these times, yet we see bullying. The problem lies in the fact that students do not have the time and opportunity to learn to mix well together in short time periods such as recess and bus rides. If they have no training on how to be together in a positive social setting, and there is no previous community building, then they lack the skills to mingle harmoniously.

Conclusions

The multiage classroom is a time-tested idea that has fallen out of vogue in public education. Many reasons exist for this dismissal, many of which are the emphasis on grade-level testing. However as we struggle to “meet students where they are” and serve a wide array of student abilities, this model may offer some answers. The social supports offered by this model make it attractive in the current atmosphere of bullying, and give the benefits of allowing a community to develop within the classroom. The largest struggle for implementing a shift to multiage education is the complete shift required in the philosophy of teaching, which is not represented in teacher education programs. Such a shift requires work and persistence, as well as the courage to stray from the norm, however the benefits for the students may make such a shift worth exploring.

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