Chapter 1: Learning and Teaching in the Multilevel Classroom

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Application of Best Practices to Multilevel Classrooms

In this resource, the term *parents* refers to both parents and guardians and is used with the recognition that in some cases only one parent may be involved in a child's education.

This resource examines the research base underpinning multilevel classrooms in which one teacher is responsible for students of a broader age-range than is generally found in the traditional single-grade classroom. It provides pedagogical and practical supports to assist the *learning community* (students, teachers, administrators, and parents) in taking advantage of the unique opportunities multilevel classrooms provide. The instructional and assessment approaches suggested for these classrooms are also best practices in single-grade classrooms.

Definitions of Terms

In this resource, the term *multilevel classrooms* refers to student-centred classrooms in which students learn across two or more grades and are taught by the same teacher for two or more years. In Manitoba, these classrooms are generally referred to as *multi-age*, *multi-grade*, and *combined classes*. Some schools/divisions/districts also use the term *alternative programming* or *flex programs* when one teacher has a broad age-range of students for two or more years.

Reasons for Establishing Multilevel Classrooms

Decisions to create multilevel classrooms are based on pedagogical and/or demographic considerations:

- Some schools/divisions/districts choose multilevel programming for philosophical reasons. These deliberately formed multilevel classrooms emphasize a continuum of learning, rather than maintaining grade differences. In such classrooms students work with the same teacher for two or more years.
- In communities with low student populations, all Early Years students, all Middle Years students, or all students from Kindergarten to Grade 8 may be taught in the same classroom. These classes, like the deliberately formed multilevel classrooms, may also emphasize a continuum of learning.
- Other schools may have two or more grades assigned to the same teacher to manage shifting enrollment. These classrooms are often viewed as a temporary measure within a school.

Regardless of whether multilevel classrooms are created for pedagogical or demographic reasons, they can be seen as assets that promote quality learning.

The Research Underpinnings

Research shows that there are many benefits to having students learn in groups with older and younger peers. The pedagogical advantages of multi-age learning are supported so well by research that some jurisdictions in North America have mandated multi-age classrooms in Early and Middle Years schools (Kasten; Miller, *Multigrade Classroom*).

The terms *multi-age* and *multi-grade* are used in much of the research. The research underpinnings highlighted here are, for the most part, reflected in all multilevel classrooms except those formed for only one year.

Although research is not available for short-term combined classes, a wealth of information exists regarding multi-age classrooms where students are with the same teacher for two or more years. Major reviews of this research into multi-age learning show several consistent trends. In reviewing 57 Canadian and American studies, Pavan found that in 91 percent of the studies, students in multi-grade classrooms performed as well as or better than students in single-grade classrooms academically (22-25). Their greatest gains tended to be in language and reading. Lolli attributes this higher literacy achievement to the integration of curricula and the construction of meaning where language skills and strategies are tools used to learn content. The benefits of an integrated approach to learning are also well supported by brain-based research and Gardner's multiple intelligences model (Politano and Paquin; Lazear; Jensen, *Teaching*; Gardner).

In affective and social indicators, students in multi-age classrooms strongly outperform students in single-grade classrooms (Miller, "Multiage Grouping"; Pratt; Connell). They score higher in study habits, social interaction, self-motivation, cooperation, and attitudes to school (Gayfer).

The benefits of having older students offer assistance to younger students are supported by research. Studies show that both the student being tutored and the student doing the tutoring improve academically (Anderson and Pavan). Kasten emphasizes that "the act of translating one's understanding into language is intellectually demanding" (5); this is certainly the role of the tutor. Vygotsky's theory of language also purports that the construction of meaning takes place within the social context of the learner and that interaction with supportive, competent language users is integral to developing language skills.

Placing students from several grades in one classroom does not in itself create a successful multi-age classroom, however. Multi-age classrooms are based on a student-centred, subject-integrated approach to learning. If a teacher assigned to a multi-age, combined, or multi-grade classroom uses approaches traditionally used in single-grade classrooms and attempts to teach separate and discrete curricula to each grade-group, the benefits are lost. According to Goodlad and Anderson, when teachers attempt to deliver distinct graded programming in a multilevel classroom, students end up doing more "seat work" than they would in a single-grade classroom.

Miller ("Multiage Grouping") and Costa and Timmons found that multi-age classrooms require more time than single-grade classrooms for teacher planning and professional development and that insufficient planning may have an impact on the success of the programming. Teachers in multilevel classrooms also require a thorough understanding of classroom assessment (Gaustad; Stiggins). It is essential, therefore, that teachers who face the challenge of two or more grades in their classrooms be provided with professional development in strategies and approaches developed by multi-age educators.

Furthermore, administrators are encouraged to maintain a combined classroom for at least two years so that students can benefit from the advantages that multilevel grouping provides, benefits that are not as evident in the first year as in the subsequent year(s). A two-year commitment to a multilevel classroom also enables teachers to initiate a two-year plan for curriculum implementation in content areas, such as science and social studies, rather than teaching two different programs simultaneously.

One limitation of many research studies is that they are "snapshots" of student attitudes and performance at a given time; few studies track students over several years. There is also an innate bias to the research in that teachers assigned to multi-age classrooms tend to be more experienced, and students placed in multilevel classes are sometimes chosen because they have independent work habits. Burns and Mason suggest that where students are assigned to multilevel classrooms, the learners' individual curricular paths should be the criteria for placement.

Clearly, however, many qualitative and quantitative studies indicate that students in multi-age classrooms perform as well as or better than students in single-grade settings in standardized tests and that they have a more positive attitude towards school, higher self-esteem, and better peer relationships. Kasten claims, "Children with a variety of needs, strengths, abilities, and ways of knowing are thriving in these classrooms" (8).

Benefits of Multilevel Classrooms

The benefits of multilevel classrooms explored in this resource apply to classrooms that are maintained for two or more years. There are distinct benefits for the whole learning community—learners, teachers, and parents.

Class/Learner Benefits

Multilevel classrooms are built on the premise that diversity is not a challenge to be overcome, but an asset and a resource that promotes learning. In reality, all classrooms are diverse. By the time students are eight years old, their academic performance in a single-grade classroom may span three or more years. In addition, students bring to the classroom a wide range of learning approaches, developmental stages, aptitudes, interests, experiences, cultural backgrounds, and personalities. Thus, there are no homogeneous classrooms.

The natural varied composition of a multilevel classroom has specific advantages for learners:

- Multilevel programming recognizes that each student is at a different stage of learning and focuses on the developmental stage of the learner; of necessity, the focus moves to individual learning along a continuum. This minimizes competition because students recognize and accept that each student is at a different place in his or her learning. Students learn to set personal learning goals, assess themselves, and reflect on their own learning.
- Multilevel classrooms provide opportunities for students to gain self-knowledge as they interact with older and younger peers. Throughout life, people rarely operate in groups that are systematically separated by age. The range of social relationships students build in a multilevel classroom more closely reflects the diverse social situations individuals encounter in workplaces, communities, and families. In fact, just as the youngest child in a family typically passes developmental milestones earlier than his or her siblings did through watching and listening to older siblings, younger students learn from the wider knowledge base of older classmates and from their modelling of skills and behaviour.

Older students likewise develop their capabilities as they assume leadership roles and articulate their understanding as they share their learning with younger students. In the multilevel classroom, though, a student's position relative to her or his classmates changes each year. Students with strong leadership skills in their own age group enter the classroom as the youngest students and learn valuable skills in following leadership. Students who are less assertive or who require more support or guidance have opportunities to share their learning with younger students and experience themselves as leaders.

- Multilevel classrooms allow for continuous progress. All learners can be challenged. In a multilevel environment, students do not need to spend time on concepts and skills they have already mastered. Students who have not attained specific learning outcomes by the end of a school year have the opportunity to achieve them the following year. In multilevel classrooms, all students are expected to attain the learning outcomes, and time becomes a variable that can help them do so. (See Chapter 3 for more information about assessment.)
- Multilevel classrooms provide students with stability and an ongoing relationship with a teacher. Continuity within the same classroom over several years helps diminish the anxiety associated with moving to a new classroom at the beginning of a new school year, and shortens the time it takes to learn new routines, thereby increasing instructional time.

Teacher Benefits

Many teachers who have experience in multilevel classrooms report that certain challenges are minimized by the fact that students are at different developmental stages. Just as families consider multiple births a greater care-taking challenge than caring for children several years apart, so teachers find there are advantages to having a contingent of older students in a classroom.

Multilevel classrooms benefit teachers in a variety of ways:

- Teachers have more time to develop a deeper understanding of each student's strengths and needs over two or more years, and can plan instruction at the student's level of development. Teachers in single-grade classrooms often feel they have only begun to know their students by the end of the school year. A multilevel classroom allows teachers to profit from their understanding of each student's unique personality, interests, and

learning styles, and offers them the satisfaction of following a student's growth over a period of years.

- Teachers have fewer students to learn to know each year. Orientation at the beginning of a school year is simplified and consumes less time. Senior students know routines and model them for new students.
- In planning programming for two or more years, teachers have opportunities to be more flexible with curricula, planning projects around student interests and current community events.
- Teachers can develop a stable parent volunteer program that relies on the same volunteers over several years. Over time, many parents feel more confident volunteering because they know the teacher better. If siblings are placed in the same multilevel classroom, teachers have the opportunity to work with a smaller group of families.

Parent Benefits

Any programming that enriches the learning of their son or daughter is clearly an advantage for parents. Parents appreciate the stable learning community of the multilevel classroom and its commitment to the learner and to the development of interpersonal skills, emotional maturity, and independence.

Multilevel classrooms benefit parents in the following ways:

- Parents have the opportunity to develop a relationship of trust with the teacher. There is time to work on and solve problems. Through an extended relationship, parents and the teacher develop as partners in supporting the independent learner.
- Because multilevel classes reflect natural family groupings, siblings are usually placed in the same classroom. This simplifies the demands on parents for attending classroom events, volunteering, and communicating with the school.
- Parents appreciate that their child experiences less stress related to beginning a new school year and adapting to the expectations and routines of a new teacher.

For a discussion of frequently asked questions about multilevel classrooms, see BLM 12: Parent Brochure.

Rewards of Meeting Challenges

The challenges of learning and teaching in a multilevel classroom will result in great rewards as all partners begin to understand the benefits that multilevel classrooms offer. With time, experience, and consistent support, multilevel learners will develop the knowledge, skills and strategies, and attitudes they need to become independent learners.

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