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Best Practice Approaches for

M ultigrade educators have to use different approaches and structures to facilitate teaching and learning, as contrasted with the teachers of single grades. As novice and seasoned multigrade teachers navigate the processes related to instruction in a multigrade environment, they must understand and appreciate that this approach to learning is unique. Effective implementation of best practice approaches requires practice. With careful mentoring, educators will learn how to adapt these approaches effectively to various learning environments and to best meet students' needs.

A Brief History

Multigrade education, or the practice of combining learners from different grade levels in one learning environment, has been a part of the education system in Canada and the United States for a long time. In fact, for many years, it was the norm in rural areas due to small class sizes and limited resources. The earliest record of multigrade education in both countries dates back to the 1800s when one-room schoolhouses were common in rural areas. Teachers would often have to provide instruction to learners from various grades at once due to limited resources and funding. As education became more centralized and urbanized in the early 1900s, a number of rural schools were forced to adopt a multigrade model due to declining enrollment and limited resources. With the introduction of standardized curriculum and grade levels in the mid-20th century, and an increase in the number of school-aged children due to the post-World War II population increase, there was a move toward single-grade classrooms, which were seen as more efficient for delivering standardized content.[1]

In the 1970s and 1980s, there was a renewed interest in multigrade education as educators recognized the benefits it provided for children. By the 1990s, multigrade education was once again accepted as a viable option for rural schools, and several provinces and states developed policies and guidelines related to its implementation. In Canada, one source shared that during this period, one in seven schools in Canada was multigrade.[2]

Multigrade Education and Adventism

The concept of multigrade education is not unique to Adventism; it is a prominent feature of public schools across the United States and Canada, as well as other countries. In 2022-2023, 60 percent of Adventist schools in the North American Division were small, multigrade schools.[3] This system of classroom organization enables Adventist schools to maximize limited resources and offer a Christian education to children who might not otherwise have access to one.

Whether deliberate or out of necessity, urban or rural, multigrade learning environments continue to provide learners with quality education opportunities that promote social and emotional learning, foster collaboration and peer mentoring among learners of different ages, and provide a more personalized and flexible approach to learning.[4]

The Multigrade Learning Environment

Every multigrade learning environment will look different, depending on its context, just as every single-grade classroom is unique. In a multigrade learning environment, children of varying grade levels and developmental levels learn alongside one another. These rich environments are unique to one-, two-, or three-teacher schools. Learners share didactic experiences from each of the grade levels present while actively participating in their learning experience. Children develop autonomous learning strategies through self-directed learning opportunities while contributing to and sharing in whole-group learning activities. In the multigrade learning environment, it is common practice to see different groups of children engaging in a variety of learning activities at the same time. Ultimately, in this type of learning environment, the learner-teacher relationship is fundamental to the process, and the teacher shifts to the role of manager and facilitator of learning rather than dispenser of knowledge. Described as a "family-like"[5] atmosphere by stakeholders, the multigrade learning experience pays tribute to the nostalgic learning spaces of yesteryear while progressively retaining relevance today.

Prioritizing a Multigrade Pedagogical Approach

For both the new multigrade teacher and the sea-soned teacher, teaching several grade levels simultaneously requires a lot of time and preparation, organization, creativity, patience, access to resources, and relevant learning ecosystem management. Multigrade teachers often find themselves shedding most of their learned single-grade pedagogical practices because they simply do not fit.[6] The beauty and challenge of a multigrade pedagogy is that it borrows most of its pedagogical practices from multiage pedagogy and, when relevant, uses single-grade pedagogy, then applies these practices contextually.[7]

A multigrade education philosophy should focus on the individual needs of each child, recognizing that children have different learning styles and abilities. Adopting learner-centric teaching and learning strategies increases the success and sustainability of multigrade education.[8] Children, throughout their multigrade learning experience, develop autonomy skills because the teacher cannot teach all the grade levels at once.[9] Through this skill development, children build initiative and learn to take ownership and responsibility for their learning. Learners receive individualized attention in this learning environment, however, differently from traditionally perceived one-on-one time. Teachers in multigrade environments use differentiated instruction, small-group work, and other methods to provide individualized attention to each child. They also work collaboratively with their learners, fostering a sense of community and learning through group work and peer-to-peer interactions.

When teaching in a multigrade learning environment, developing a pedagogy that informs a multigrade teacher's practice allows for greater awareness of essential theories and methodologies that best sustain learning and learner success.

Overview of Quality Teaching Practices

Effective multigrade teaching practices are not only effective in the multigrade classroom but also are successful in the single-grade classroom; however, the reverse may not always be applicable. Contextual evidence-based teaching practices enhance the sustainability of the multigrade learning environment and enhance the quality of education for all children.[10] Below are some time- and re-

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search-proven effective teaching practices:

1. Whole-class Teaching: Some lessons can be taught at the same time. When applicable, whole-classroom instruction is an efficient strategy by which the teacher can facilitate learning and teaching using one lesson instead of creating several different mini-lessons and workshops for each grade level. In whole-class teaching, the learning activities may be the same, yet the expectations of learners and assessments differ.[11]

2. Curriculum Rotation: Curriculum rotation partly simulates split-grade/single-grade learning in a multigrade learning environment. This practice involves teachers alternating/rotating certain subject curricula and learning standards. This is not always possible in sequential subjects where concepts build on one another, like mathematics, or in grade levels where standardized tests are mandated.[12]

3. Peel-off Strategy: In this instructional method, teachers plan and deliver lessons that are suitable for different ages and learning levels within a single classroom. The strategies aim to "peel off" the lessons from the centralized teaching materials and differentiate them for different learners' readiness levels to ensure that each one can achieve his or her full potential. This provides opportunities for effective individualized and cooperative learning, maximizing the benefits of multigrade classrooms while also addressing individual learners' needs.[13]

4. Staggered Starts: Decreasing wait time minimizes "learning loss" as students wait for learning instructions from their teacher. Teachers often will stagger the start of subjects and learning activities when different levels of teacher-learner attention are required.[14]

5. Differentiated Activities: Differentiated learning is a crucial component of multigrade education. It helps to ensure that all students are challenged and engaged in the learning process. By using flexible grouping, choice boards (see p. 43), personalized learning plans, project-based learning, and technology integration, teachers can create a dynamic and inclusive learning environment for their students. Providing activities for remediation or extension allows the teacher to gauge a child's level of learning. Activities can be differentiated by varying levels of complexity for several reasons, including the learning outcome, learning process, or complexity of the learning product.[15]

6. Peer Tutoring: Children from different grade levels

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are paired together to learn from each other. This method involves assigning older or more experienced learners to assist younger or less-experienced learners in their studies. It requires the use of cooperative learning techniques that create an environment of trust among learners of different levels. The main goal of peer tutoring is to encourage collaboration, communication, and critical-thinking skills among learners while improving their academic performance.[16]

7. Cooperative and Collaborative Learning: Authentic cooperative learning opportunities involve children working together in small groups to accomplish a shared goal or learning objective. Consider these five principles for successful cooperative and collaborative learning opportunities:[17]

a. *Positive interdependence:* All members of the group need to feel that they are working together for a common goal and that the success of the group as a whole depends on each individual.

b. *Individual accountability:* Each member of the group must be held accountable for his or her individual contribution to the group's success.

c. *Face-to-face interaction:* Cooperative learning requires that students have face-to-face interaction to effectively communicate and collaborate with their group members.

d. *Social skills:* Students must develop social skills such as communication, active listening, and conflict resolution to work effectively in a group.

e. *Group processing:* The group should regularly reflect on their progress, identify strengths and weaknesses, and make adjustments as needed to improve their performance.

These five principles, when used in a multigrade classroom, provide opportunities for teachers to differentiate instruction and for learners to develop life skills and the ability to innovate, while encouraging communication and collaboration skills with others in the classroom.[18]

8. Open-ended Questioning: Open-ended questioning typically begins with words like *how, what,* and *why,* and encourages discussion, exploration, and creativity. The goal of asking open-ended questions is to encourage the person being questioned to provide thoughtful and complex answers that express his or her depth of knowledge and experience.[19]

9. Independent Learning Routines: Independent learning routines are activities and tasks provided by teachers to help children work independently and take responsibility for their own learning. These routines provide opportunities for learners to develop self-discipline, problem-solving skills, and critical-thinking abilities. Some examples of multigrade education independent learning routines include:

Learning Centers: Teachers create designated areas in the classroom where children can work independently on various learning activities.

Project-Based Learning: Not to be confused with *doing* a project, project-based teaching is an instructional approach that uses real-world projects as the basis for learning. Rather than teaching discrete skills or concepts in isolation, project-based teaching provides children with opportunities to apply their knowledge and skills to authentic problems or challenges. Learners work collaboratively to create products of their learning, solve problems, or complete tasks that have real-world relevance. Project-based teaching emphasizes learners-centered learning, allowing learners to take ownership of their learning and work at their own pace. Teachers act as facilitators or coaches, providing guidance and support as needed rather than lecturing or directing every step of the way.[20]

Choice Boards: Teachers provide learners with a list of learning activities from which they can choose based on their interests, learning style, and needs. Choice boards can be adapted to meet the needs of students of different ages and abilities and can be used across a variety of subjects and topics. By offering a range of activities, choice boards provide learners with opportunities to work at their own pace and level while still engaging with the same content or topic as their peers. Additionally, choice boards can be designed to foster collaboration and peer teaching, as learners may choose to work on the same activity or project as a peer or work on different activities and then share their learning with others.[21]

Task Cards: Teachers create sets of cards that contain independent learning tasks that children can complete on their own.

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Inquiry-based Learning: Learners pose questions and investigate answers through research, experiments, and discussions.

Multigrade Assessment Practices

Multigrade education assessment practices involve identifying and addressing the diverse learning needs of learners from different grade levels in one classroom. Teachers use a variety of methods to measure student progress and learning and use this information to adapt instruction to meet individual learners' needs. In all classrooms, assessment for learning should reflect what learners are able to do.[22]

Some commonly used assessment practices include:

Learning Readiness and Diagnostic Assessments: These assessments help identify the strengths and weaknesses of individual learners in different subjects. The teacher can plan targeted interventions and instruction for each child. Learner readiness assessment can help students set realistic goals and develop a plan for achieving academic success.

Formative assessments: These ongoing checks throughout the learning process help teachers monitor each child's progress and gather evidence about his or her learning in order to modify teaching strategies to better meet individual needs.

Summative assessments: These are usually given at the end of a unit, term, or year to evaluate learning performance. They help measure the knowledge and skills learners have acquired throughout the term and give the teacher valuable insights into their pedagogical effectiveness.

Portfolio-type assessments: Collecting samples of a learner's work in different subjects over a period of time provides targeted exemplars of each child's growth and success. They help the teacher evaluate progress over time and provide learners with opportunities to reflect on their own learning. Coupled with student-led conferences, portfolio-type assessments allow learners to interpret their work to their guardians in a way that clearly articulates and illustrates their performance, process, and product.[23]

Peer and self-assessment: Learners evaluate their in-

dependent work and the work of their peers. This helps children better understand the evaluation process and encourages collaboration and a greater sense of responsibility for their own learning.

Informal assessments: These assessments include observations, interviews, and conversations with learners. Teachers gather information on learner behavior, attitudes, and social-emotional needs, which can be used to personalize instruction.

In multigrade education, teachers often use a combination of these assessment practices to get a comprehensive picture of each learner's knowledge and skills. By adapting assessments to meet the unique needs of a multigrade learning environment, teachers can provide targeted and effective instruction to all their learners. Assessment for learning empowers students to take ownership of their own learning by helping them to understand their strengths and weaknesses, set learning goals, and develop a growth mindset. Assessment for learning supports young people in their journey toward becoming self-regulated, lifelong learners.

Conclusion

A multigrade classroom offers a diverse learning environment where learners of different ages and abilities work together. This creates an opportunity for socialization and helps learners develop a sense of empathy and understanding toward others. Teachers can personalize learning activities based on the abilities and strengths of each child. Since there is a wider range of abilities than in single-grade classrooms, teachers can differentiate instruction to build upon what children already know and help them grow in areas where they need more support. Teachers have the flexibility to adjust the pace of learning based on the needs of individual learners or the class. This can help teachers accommodate different learning styles and needs and ensure that students are able to be successful in their learning journeys. By bringing together children of different ages and backgrounds, a multigrade learning environment can help build a sense of community and foster a supportive learning environment. Children learn from one another and develop a sense of responsibility and leadership, which can benefit them beyond the classroom. ✍

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