

BIGGER

IS NOT NECESSARILY BETTER

Advantages of Multigrade Schooling

Do students who come from little red one-room schoolhouses get an inferior education? Not necessarily!

During the mid-20th century America discovered the school bus and the philosophy that "bigger is better." This resulted in the consolidation of many small one-room schools into larger school districts. Researchers and administrators simply assumed that bigger schools with more teachers provided for a better quality of education and a more effective learning environment.

However, Adventist education has never abandoned the small multigrade school concept. Out of necessity our schools are small, because they are located in communities with small Adventist populations. These congregations operate schools because they believe that Christian education is essential to the spiritual, intellectual, physical, and social development of their children. In 1989, 74 percent of Seventh-day Adventist elementary schools in North America were multigrade schools with fewer than four teachers. Forty-three percent were one-teacher schools.¹

It is natural to ask, "Does the size of the school and the number of teachers and students influence the quality and effectiveness of student learning? Can a small multigrade school really offer quality education? Does it provide effectively for the spiritual, physical, intellectual, and social development of the child?"

Today's one-room schools don't fit our nostalgic picture of the "little red schoolhouse" furnished with hard benches and a potbellied stove to keep the children and teacher warm during the cold winter months. However, the multigrade arrangement can provide an effective educational model for teaching children today.

Evidence and research substantiate the many advantages students receive in

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a multigrade environment, and challenge the philosophy that "bigger is better."

Advantages of Multigrade Schooling

Social Development and Self-Concept

Several factors influence the overall learning process. According to Carl Rogers in his book, *Client-Centered Therapy*, self-concept is a vital aspect of

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personality development that greatly influences a child's behavior. Self-concept and self-esteem play a major role in the child's learning and social maturation.²

In his book, *The Self in Growth, Teaching, and Learning*, Hamachek says that individuals build self-confidence through the way they are treated by teachers, parents, and peers.³

Research for my doctoral dissertation investigated one-teacher Seventh-day Adventist schools in the Texas Conference. I compared the students in grades 4-8 from these schools in terms of self-concept and performance on work-study skills, with students enrolled in the traditional single-grade classroom. Results were measured by national norms in the areas of self-concept and work-study skills.

Evidence revealed conclusively that children enrolled in Seventh-day Adventist multigrade schools in Texas were significantly superior to students enrolled in single-grade traditional classrooms, nationwide. These conclusions suggest that small multigrade schools can be very effective.⁴

Self-Concept and Work Study Skills

My research also indicated that students' self-concept and achievement in work-study skills are greatly enhanced by the multigrade environment. Heilman, Blair, and Rupley in their book, *Principles and Practices of Teaching Reading* claim that teachers frequently fail to teach work-study skills in the classroom. In fact, they say that many teachers do not even detect deficiencies in this area. A number of students enter high school and college unable to use textbook aids such as maps, graphs, indexes, and glossaries.

Heilman, Blair, and Rupley emphasize the need for more adequate work-study skills to be included in the elementary school curriculum and the need for teachers to teach these skills.⁵

Zintz agrees, adding that many elementary teachers fail to teach skills such as making outlines, learning to read maps, and locating information in the library.⁶

My research concluded that students in multigrade schools have developed effective work-study skills. They learn these skills because they spend so much time doing self-directed activities.

Self-Concept and Reading Achievement

Several studies have compared self-concept with reading achievement. Researchers have found significant positive relationships between self-concept and reading achievement. In an examination of fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-grade

students, Henderson found a positive correlation between self-concept and reading achievement.⁷

In comparing children with similar intelligence, Jackson concluded that those with better self-concepts learned to read more quickly and with less difficulty than those with lower self-concepts.⁸ Other researchers such as Schnee and Frerichs have also found positive relationships between self-concept and reading achievement.

This research has positive implications for students enrolled in multigrade schools. These students exhibit more positive self-concepts and greater self-confidence. This appears to be a major factor in reading achievement.^{9, 10}

Jerome Thayer conducted a research study of 8,000 students from Seventh-day Adventist schools in the Atlantic Union Conference and concluded that the average student's academic achievement was one month ahead of the national average.¹¹

Using standardized tests and procedures, Rehwoldt and Hamilton compared students in multigrade classrooms with those in traditional single-grade classrooms. They concluded that reading, math, and language achievement was higher in multigrade classrooms.¹²

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Lower Student Teacher Ratio and Peer Tutoring

Students enrolled in multigrade classrooms have the advantage of a lower teacher-student ratio. This should result in each student's receiving more individualized attention and instruction. Smaller class size also facilitates better assessment of individual students' needs.

Multigrade students also benefit from cross-age tutoring. This reinforces their learning and enhances students' self-image. Ellen White advocates this philosophy in *Education*:

Cooperation should be the spirit of the school room. The teacher who gains cooperation of

his pupils secures an invaluable aid in maintaining order. Let the older assist the younger, the strong, the weak, and, so far as possible, let each be called to do something in which he excels.¹³

Experience has shown that younger students learn from older students, and older students gain self-confidence and leadership ability as they interact with younger students. The multigrade classroom provides a natural environment—one similar to that of the family, rather than the traditional single-age grouping.

Newly Developed SDA Curriculum Materials

An important component of learning is high quality, up-to-date curriculum materials. Small Adventist schools use materials developed especially for their students. The church is continually evaluating and upgrading multigrade curriculum materials.

The North American Division Office of Education has recently developed several new programs such as the Small School Library program, the Small School Spelling Program, and integrated computer and science curriculum materials.

Besides excellent academic materials for the students, the denomination has

also developed a number of excellent resources and instructional programs for the teacher, such as the *Small School Survival Guide*, *Small Schools Digest—A Series of Instructional Programs for Teachers of Small Schools*, and *Reading Management in the Small School*, prepared by the Columbia Union Conference.

Individualization

Another advantage of the multigrade classroom is that students can progress at their own pace, while still meeting academic expectations. Curriculum materials designed for the multigrade school help the teacher to integrate and correlate subject content. Student learning and achievement is enhanced by learning centers, audio-visual and listening centers, and by the library reading corner.

Even public educators are seeing the value of multigrade education. The July 29, 1990, Fort Worth *Star-Telegram* reported at a National Governors Annual Meeting. At that meeting the following statement was made about educational goals:

Age grading and fixed school years could be detrimental to those preschool and younger children who aren't making adequate progress...States should consider other approaches such as upgraded programs or *multigrade grouping* to allow students to progress at their pace and still be able to meet performance standards.¹⁴

Conclusion

Students enrolled in multigrade classrooms have several advantages and benefits:

1. Because of their high reading achievement, multigrade students may have a better self-concept.

2. Multigrade students develop better work-study skills and the ability to work independently.

3. Some research has found that students in multigrade classrooms score higher in reading and math achievement than students in single-grade classrooms.

4. Cross-age tutoring offers significant advantages, as older students help and teach younger students. This interaction benefits both groups of students.

5. The multigrade environment provides a more natural, family-style atmosphere.

6. Newly developed SDA science, computer, spelling, and small school library curricula help teachers and students build on the strengths of multigrade schools to ensure high achievement levels.

7. Children can progress at their own rates.

8. Lower student-teacher ratio allows for more individual attention and instruction.

Like the rest of Adventist education, multigrade schools focus on preparing students for eternity. It is their aim to fulfill Ellen White's challenge:

Higher than the highest human thought can reach is God's ideal for His children. Godliness—godlikeness—is the goal to be reached. Before the student there is opened a path of continual progress. He has an object to achieve, a standard to attain, that includes everything good, and pure, and noble. He will advance as fast and as far as possible in every branch of true knowledge.¹⁵ □

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- ⁴ Dee Anderson, *An Investigation of Relationships of Work-Study Skills and Self-Concept of Students Enrolled in Grades Four Through Eight*

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¹² Warren Hamilton and Walter Rehboldt, "By Their Differences They Learn," *National Elementary Principal*, 37 (December 1957), pp. 27-29.

¹³ Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1952), p. 285.

¹⁴ Fort Worth *Star-Telegram*, "Quit Grouping by Age, Education Study Says" (July 29, 1990), Sect. 1, p. 8.

¹⁵ White, *Education*, p. 18.