



Choosing a School Is No Small Matter

Like most people, I have size preferences, starting with small churches—where everyone knows your name, and everyone’s glad you came.¹ Add to that small towns, small cars, small hospitals, small choirs, small pills, and numerous other “smalls” in a list that seems to grow LARGER the older I get. On the other hand, I adamantly prefer large dogs, large planes, large hats, large cookies, large pianos, large print (there’s that age factor again) and large families—the latter probably because I wasn’t raised in one.

However, when it comes to schools—large or small—I am some-

what torn. I went to a large public high school, but a small Christian college. My first teaching job was in a large junior high; then I transferred to a multi-grade “country” church school. I have taught in one of the largest academies in the United States and also one of the smallest. And—here’s the truth—I could argue the advantages and disadvantages of each.

One school environment is most near and dear to my heart, however: the environment found in small, multi-grade Adventist schools. As I hear of dwindling Adventist schools in the North American Division and conference battles to close them (or not), I have to conclude that many constituents are simply of the mindset that,

when it comes to school, the larger the better.

Such parents either have not investigated or simply choose to ignore the solid research that in most of the small multigrade schools students learn well, amplify their talents, feel safe, and develop lasting leadership skills. In the book *The Multi-Age Classroom: A Family of Learners*,² authors Wendy Kasten and Barbara Clark discuss America’s early country schools and conclude that today’s multigrade environments offer the same solid advantages:

“Rural America has its own history of multi-age one- or two-room schoolhouses. . . . [C]hildren remained with

BY MICHELLE NASH

the same teacher and primarily the same class of students for multiple years. School was a stable, reliable environment. . . . [T]he mix of ages and abilities provided optimum opportunities for student collaboration. . . . There was no apparent ceiling on the content taught, discussed, or overheard, which benefited older students by design and younger students more incidentally.”³

While many of America’s country schools are shutting their doors, in New Zealand such multigrade classrooms are still common,⁴ and the country maintains one of the highest literacy rates in the world!⁵

We who have been educated or taught in that multigrade world are not in the least surprised.

Growing Up Adventist: Reflections From a Teacher

In Andy Nash’s book *Growing Up Adventist*,⁶ he refers to the Detroit Lakes Seventh-day Adventist Church School in Detroit Lakes, Minnesota (at that time grades 1-8 with two teachers) in a minimum of 10 chapters. His mostly lighthearted autobiography started as a series in the *Adventist Review* and featured the life of an average kid growing up in a mid-sized Adventist church in western Minnesota. The narratives chronicle church socials, Sabbath school, family activities, Adventist traditions (potlucks, Ingathering, etc.), and church school. To put it simply, Andy loved that little church, and he *really* loved the school.

Andy attended public school for kindergarten and 1st grade before enrolling in the multigrade Adventist school located in the church. He stayed there from grades 2 to 4, departing in grade 5 because (1) he would be the only upper-grade boy, (2) his mother was the upper-grade teacher, and (3) his 5th-grade public school teacher was Mr. Burgeson, a dear Adventist friend.

I remember it well, being his mother and the impending teacher.

The good things that happen and the experiences created in a small

school’s multigrade family-type atmosphere are nearly impossible to replicate in single-grade settings. For example, I rarely had problems with my 3rd graders learning the multiplication tables. After all, they had heard the drill since 1st grade. Academic depth is established in the rhythm of the cycling curriculum, and leadership traits develop naturally. Who better to help a little girl than a bigger girl? And after 1st grade, the little girl automatically becomes a “big” girl, much to her joy. I recall a 3rd-grade math whiz helping a 6th-grade struggler—and not a soul blinked or bullied.

When all the grades played Capture the Flag or Hide and Seek, patience trumped competition. When we worked on Christmas plays, everyone had a starring role. When we sang together, the blend of younger and older voices was rich and moving. Learning, playing, singing, performing—it was all fun because it just *was!*

And amidst the mandatory flexibility, individualization, and peer tutoring, children learned. The Cognitive-Genesis study revealed that multigrade students often test higher than average on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills in every academic category.⁷ While research⁸ has confirmed this, in my small-school laboratory across 10-plus years, I formed an opinion of why that could be true:

- Students feel comfortable and secure during testing. (Wouldn’t you be more relaxed performing in front of your friends and family?)

- Students learn from one another across the grades and over the years. They hear concepts before they have to learn them. And many benefit from daily peer tutoring and quiet opportunities to move ahead (or back) in a particular subject.

Our Adventist curriculum for small schools was incredible. Science and social studies were studied in grade-

groups, not single grades. So when we dissected a cow’s eyes for 8th-grade science, many curious lower-grade students were right there in the mix.

When we cooked hot lunches in the church’s kitchen, everyone took turns measuring, slicing, boiling, baking, serving, praying, and cleaning up. When we took a field trip to a farm for an “archaeological dig,” everyone brought shovels and gloves. When we made pinhole cameras from oatmeal boxes and set up a darkroom, all eight grades perfected their oatmeal box cameras, developed negative and positives prints, and shared in the science fair trophy—with pride!

Of course, it helped that I had some particularly helpful pastors who volunteered weekly for recess and worships. It wasn’t so much what they said or did but rather that they wanted to know the kids; they enjoyed being part of the program. I do recall one new pastor who initially said, “But I have the church to manage.” And I said, “Well, I teach in kindergarten Sabbath school—even though I have the school to manage.” Together, we became a team.

Our school was not perfect, and we faced the same challenges many small schools do. And occasionally, some selfishness, moodiness, stubbornness, and poor decision making existed—and all that from the teacher! But overall, we were blessed with a large amount of mercy and grace. As in a family, we knew each other very well and loved each other deeply.

Eventually, the Nash family moved to Florida, where I taught in a large K-8 Adventist school. At one point, I had students ranging from age 11 through age 14 in my 8th-grade English classes. “*Really?*” I gasped. Even though all students were assigned the same subject content, there were big developmental differences, and I often thought how the youngest and oldest students could have benefited from the more flexible multigrade setting.



Multigrade classrooms and schools continue to nurture students' social and academic growth, and the Adventist system takes the best of all school worlds and makes it better by adding Bible study, prayer, faith experiences, and worship.

The Oldest Model Comes Full Circle

Modern education research is leading many schools to employ teaching a so-called “new” methodology that is the standard arrangement in the multi-grade classroom:

“The more we learned [about multi-grade 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.”

Along that line, a principal in a 2,000-student public elementary school in Orlando, Florida, invited me to talk to her staff. That school was one of many transitioning into multigrade mode for a single reason: so students

could stay with their teacher more than one year. I so enjoyed calming the nerves of those anxious teachers: “Give it a try. The kids learn from one another, and just when you get to know them well, they won’t be gone. I think you’ll never want to go back to single-grade.”

There are several benefits to a multi-grade system. In *Redesigning Schools: What Matters and What Works*, Linda Darling-Hammond says: “Educational

researchers have found that, all else equal, in comparison to large schools, small schools tend to have:

- better attendance rates
- stronger academic achievement
- lower dropout rates
- higher grades
- fewer failed courses
- greater participation in activities
- less vandalism and violence
- fewer behavioral incidents
- especially strong academic results for low-income students and students of color.”¹⁰

And, with strong curriculum and church support, the teacher has the best environment to teach successfully.

Affect is an educational term that refers to social relationships and attitudes. In studies by Bruce Miller,¹¹ of 21 separate measures used to assess student affect, 81 percent favored the multigrade classrooms.

Multigrade classrooms and schools continue to nurture students’ social and academic growth, and the Adventist system takes the best of all school worlds and makes it better by adding Bible study, prayer, faith experiences, and worship. What a beautiful opportunity to nurture the spiritual development of children, shaping that God-given desire to connect with heaven.

Shouldn’t Adventist teachers, pastors, parents, and supportive church members commit to maintaining even the smallest of the small schools? After all, the worthy little “customers” in these schools will be the very ones to replace former teachers, pastors, parents, and church members.

Thinking Large Could Lead to Thinking “Small”

When it comes to choosing a school for our most precious possessions—children!—I have three suggestions:

1. To Adventist colleges competing to be cutting edge, make a commitment to train elementary education majors in pedagogy for multigrade classrooms. Society’s tradition of coming “full circle” is not a cliché.

2. To teachers in small schools: Hang in there. You have one of the greatest opportunities to connect with children and teach well. If anyone asked me to briefly describe my favorite teaching experience in all my seven locations, without skipping a beat I would say, “Teaching in a one-room school.”

3. To parents of elementary-age Adventist children: Do your research. Larger is not necessarily better. The church school next door to the church you attend could be a diamond-in-the-rough.¹²

If I had one vote to cast—small school or large—and with all things comparatively equal (teacher preparation and dedication being Number 1), my thumb would press on the scale of the smaller school.

With an education system that’s both consistent and caring, chances are *large* that more boys and girls will choose to “grow up Adventist”—and when they get old, they will not depart from it.¹³ ✍



Michelle Nash, M.A., is Andy Nash’s mom and former teacher. Mrs. Nash has been teaching for 40 years in a variety of learning environments: small schools, large schools, private schools, and public schools. Currently, she teaches 8th-grade English in the Lincoln Public School system and Methods in Secondary Language Arts at Union College in Lincoln, Nebraska.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. A rephrasing of the lyrics for the theme song for *Cheers* by Gary Portnoy and Judy Hart, Published by Lyrics © Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC.
2. Wendy Kasten and Barbara Clark, *The*

Multi-Age Classroom: A Family of Learners (Katonah, N.Y.: Richard C. Owen Publishers, Inc., 1993), p. vii.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 1, 2.

4. Small rural schools, defined as having one to two teachers for all students, comprised 50 percent of all schools in New Zealand from 1877 through the early 1990s. As of 2006, 30 percent of the 2,488 public schools could be considered rural, and only 8 percent of all New Zealand students attended a rural school. Read Nancy Swarbrick, *Country Schooling – Years of Reform: 1989 Onwards*, Te Ara – the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, updated July 13, 2012: <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/country-schooling/page-4>. Unless otherwise indicated, Websites in the references were accessed January 7, 2015.

5. New Zealand in the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD): http://www.stats.govt.nz/browse_for_stats/government_finance/central_government/nz-in-the-oecd/education.aspx.

6. Andy Nash, *Growing Up Adventist: A Fond Look Back at the Church That Taught Me Faith, Love, and Laughter* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1997).

7. See Martha Havens, Jerome Thayer, and Elissa Kido, “Small Schools: How Effective Are the Academics?” on page 15 of this issue of the *Journal*.

8. Students who attended two previous years with the same teacher scored higher on benchmark tests than students new to the classroom: Diane Lataille-Démoré, “Combined Grade Classrooms,” in *The Literacy Numeracy Secretariat* (2007):9.

9. Kasten and Clark, *The Multi-Age Classroom: A Family of Learners*, op. cit., p. 3.

10. Linda Darling-Hammond, *Redesigning Schools: What Matters and What Works: 10 Features of Good Small Schools* (Stanford, Calif.: School Redesign Network at Stanford University, 2002), p. 4: <http://stanford.edu/~ldh/publications/LDH-Redesigning-Schools-10.pdf>.

11. Bruce Miller, “Teaching and Learning in the Multigrade Classroom,” *ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools* (1991), ED335178: <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED335178.pdf>.

12. Havens, Thayer, and Kido, “Small Schools: How Effective Are the Academics?” op. cit.

13. Roger L. Dudley, “Christian Education and Youth Retention in the Seventh-day Adventist Church: Findings From a 10-Year Longitudinal Study,” in *The Journal of Adventist Education* 62:3 (February/March 2000):8-13: <http://circle.adventist.org/files/jae/en/jae200062030806.pdf>. See also Proverbs 22:6.