

# Sunnyhills College

## Mixed ability classrooms and multi-level teaching

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### Background

Multi-level teaching is based on a number of assumptions about learners and teachers. These are

- All groups of students are representative of a range of abilities;
- Abilities of students vary according to what is being taught;
- Individual students have preferred learning styles;
- Individual teachers have preferred teaching styles;
- There are optimal opportunities for exploiting learning readiness;
- When students are placed in a class with a range of abilities and learning styles, learning opportunities are increased;
- Groups of teachers representing different teaching styles offer more learning opportunities and greater effectiveness than otherwise;
- Reflection, both of self and in others, is a fundamental and paramount component of learning;
- Students imbed what they have learnt by teaching;
- Teaching moves students from dependence, through independence to interdependence.

All students function at different levels and all classrooms are multi-level classrooms. Good teaching and learning arrangements need to cater for this situation.

The realisation of ability ranges and preferred learning styles obliges educators to arrange different groups of students for different purposes and to allow access to education according to a student's readiness, learning style and point of need. Different ability grouping arrangements include ability groups, mixed ability groups,

interest groups, gender-specific groups, teacher-directed groups and student-directed groups. Mixed learning style groups offer the most thorough coverage of a given teaching point.

**Multi-level teaching aspires to meet the different needs of students in any given class. It requires an attitude that ignores the notion that a specific age group requires a specific curriculum and embraces the notion that specific students need to access curriculum according to need. It shifts the emphasis from teaching subjects to teaching students.**

When multi-level teaching includes multi-aging, it occurs in a social context that tries to reflect the real world of relationships within and consequent to families, adult interactions and adult workplaces, all of which are multi-aged. It allows for nurturing, mentoring, modelling, reward, affiliation and leadership within more natural or common grouping arrangements. It also encourages and extracts a greater tolerance for differences in children, including disabilities, developmental delays, talents and high intellectual potential.

Schools come late into the learning continuum. Approximately 80% of learning has already occurred before a child reaches five years of age and the quality of dialogue before the age of five is by far the biggest contributor to university entrance (by a factor of 4). The learning that occurs in these early years, before a child begins school, is through immersion in multi-aged, mixed ability, needs-based contexts.

Schools have traditionally reorganised these natural learning contexts into insular and artificial age-based environments that do not reflect or offer the learning opportunities previously encountered. The multi-level classroom attempts to represent the real world where people successfully function and thrive within a range of abilities, preferences and ages.

## **History**

The modern paradigm of Western style schools substantially originated in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century as a private system with the purpose of educating adolescent boys from financially privileged families. Over approximately 140 years, the development of schooling has been mainly politically driven and bound by conservative influences.

Educational innovation and progression has depended upon popularism and, until the last 40 years, not substantially grounded in sound research and reflection. The development of multi-level teaching largely owes its existence to

- A history of organisational convenience;
- The advent of the information age;
- Parallel research in the latter years.

### **Organisational convenience**

Before improved communication and travel changed how and where we lived, many schools serviced small communities. Teaching was the delivery of knowledge and skills about information that was either needed for future employment or deemed necessary for social adeptness. The knowledge and skills were targeted for age groups (probably by historical precedence or accident) and much of what was learned was by rote or memorising facts. This delivery was not designed to empower the learner as a learner for life nor consider the readiness and abilities of the students. It is commonly referred to as the “empty vessel” approach to education.

Schools in small communities usually had one or two teachers. These teachers were obliged to progressively deliver the curriculum to a wide range of age levels. Each teacher did this by physically organising the students into single-age groups and teaching to a chalkboard that segregated the work for each group. Progression through the groups was by mastery of skills and knowledge over given time periods.

For organisational convenience, some teachers reduced the number of groups according to ability and introduced a monitor system or “train the trainer” approach. They also used whole-school grouping for certain activities, such as the school’s annual concert.

Small schools with more than two teachers saw the need for equity in class size. The organisation of classes according to age meant that some classes had considerably more children in them than others. With the advent of teacher unions and associations, this became an industrial issue and pressure was applied to ensure equitable working conditions. Again, commonsense prevailed and teachers explored grouping arrangements that gained efficiencies.

The composite classroom was a probable outcome of these conditions. Composite classes combine two or more grade levels into the one class but continue to substantially teach the students as separate grades, especially in the core curriculum areas of literacy and numeracy.

Composite classes created microcosms for teachers to encounter realities of learning and learners. Innovative teachers, who recognised and acknowledged that children progress at different rates, experimented with ways to streamline this cumbersome approach and gain efficiencies in teaching and learning.

### **The advent of the information age**

The industrial revolution of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was a major determinant of school organisation. It deemed that there was a certain body of knowledge that was useful, if not necessary, for employment within an industrial paradigm. That body of knowledge could be mapped out in terms of its scope and sequence and

progressively taught according to its accumulative nature, complexity, difficulty or abstract nature. Schools reflected the industrial construct of their society.

Because they became an assembly line that admitted, promoted and graduated students according to age and achievement, the organisation of schools was age based. Students began school at a certain age, were usually promoted with their peers and usually graduated with their peers. This model of school organisation prevailed and has persisted into the advent of the current information age.

The information age has thrown the assumptions of the industrial age into disarray. Through the school systems, a student could never collect and recollect the amount of useful information now accumulated in the world and the need to acquire set packages of prescribed knowledge has been superseded by the need to access knowledge as required.

The rate of change in the information age is increasing at an exponential rate and is driving the imperative that learning is for the future, not the present. In the words of John Abbott, "In times of change, learners inherit the earth while the learned are wonderfully equipped for a world that no longer exists."

Learners now need to develop scaffolding that empowers them to

- Ask the right questions to expedite solutions to problems;
- Hypothesise, estimate and verify;
- Access required information through human, physical and technological resources;
- Skilfully manipulate information;
- Reflect upon progress and gain purposeful direction;
- Have a sense of arrival.

That is why our School wide Learning Results are to

- Acquire knowledge;
- Think analytically, creatively and strategically;
- Communicate effectively;
- Work collaboratively;
- Take responsibility.

The role of teachers in meeting this need of learners is to help them build and use the scaffolding. More and more, teachers are becoming facilitators and, if they do not respond to this demand, they run the risk of being redundant.

Scaffolding consists of understandings, skills, strategies, values and attitudes. It includes the ability to visualise a preferred future, identify indicators for achievement, strategically plan for achievement, persist, reflect, adapt, modify and reach realisation.

These are the tools of learning and the tools of success. In the Information Age, highly successful students tend to be cooperative, proactive, empathetic and skilful in study, investigation and problem solving. It is therefore most important that schools do not neglect the components of cooperation, proactivity and empathy in their curriculum planning and delivery. These components are best delivered through a variety of group work for different purposes and it is important that the variety includes multi-aging.

### **Parallel research in the latter years**

Early teacher training occurred in the classroom. Teacher Colleges taught the scope and sequence of curriculum and practicums took up most of the training time, with trainees being placed with experienced teachers who monitored performance and provided feedback on a daily basis. Such an approach was trapped in conservatism and confined to the dominant methodology of the time. Innovation was rare and went largely unrewarded. Teachers tended to teach as they were taught.

With the advent of alternative schools, such as A.S. Neil's famous "School on The Hill" in England, the traditional educational paradigms of schools were challenged and the processes of learning rather than the content of learning were investigated. These schools were very experimental in nature, basing much of their philosophy on hypothesis and then developing through pragmatism. They often became a springboard for progressive educational ideas that caught the interest of academics and began to be pursued at that level.

The work of child psychologists, such as Jean Piaget and respected educators, such as John Holt and Maria Montessori, came to the fore and the works of eminent psychiatrists, such as Sigmund Freud, were revisited. How children learn and develop was the focus of teacher training rather than what children should learn.

More recently, different learning styles have been identified and the whole issue of intelligence challenged and redefined. Personality types, genetic imprinting, brain development, developmental stages and sociology have all impacted greatly on modern teaching methods. The study of learning and learners is now a major industry, impacting greatly on how modern schools function.

As teacher training progressed from an apprenticeship model to a tertiary-based intellectual level, research took place in the practical context of the classroom. Such research inevitably placed composite classes under the microscope and teachers pursuing higher degrees undertook action research projects that, among other things, investigated the various ways of grouping students.

Cooperative group learning, multi-aging, ability and mixed-ability grouping, inquiry-based learning, open-ended learning, the integrated curriculum, learning centres, guided reading and writing, ungraded schooling, cross-age tutoring, teaching to learning styles & personality preferences, catering for multiple intelligences, team teaching and designing middle-school programs for adolescents are all products of modern research.

## **Theory**

Multi-levelling constitutes different organisational arrangements of students that address their particular needs at a given time for a particular purpose and usually includes multi-aging. Multi-aging is the grouping of children over a given age range in the one classroom at a school. It assigns a range of age levels to the one class but groups the students in various ways for different purposes.

Multi-aging is an organizational arrangement designed to suit teaching practices that are based on the principles of

- Developmental Learning;
- Ability Ranges;
- Preferred Learning Styles;
- Multiple Intelligences;
- Personality Preferences.

Of these, the main issue that impacts on multi-aging is developmental learning.

### **Developmental learning:**

Developmental learning is linked to the child psychology paradigm that places children on a continuum of development that has five, loosely defined stages.

- 0 years old to 6 years old;
- 6 years old to 9 years old;
- 9 years old to 12 years old;
- 12 years old to 16 years old;
- 16 years old to 22 years old.

Each stage represents a period of readiness for a person to substantially gain particular skills and/or understandings. For example, the ability to consistently spell words correctly relies heavily on visual memory. Visual memory fully develops in many children at approximately ages 4 to 7 years old. The educational implication is that spelling should not be taught until visual memory has sufficiently developed.

The main educational implication of developmental stages is that students can be grouped according to their learning readiness and preferences rather than their chronological age. Students within a particular developmental stage can be taught using the same teaching strategies, targeted to address the learning needs, styles and preferences typical of that stage.

## **Practice**

Multi-leveilling and Multi-aging have implications for student placement, resource management, workforce planning and teacher selection. However, the main implications for teaching practice lie in the areas of

- Curriculum planning, such as the integrated curriculum, the use of Bloom's Taxonomy, designing an open-ended curriculum, designing an outcome-based curriculum, inquiry learning;
- Teaching strategies, such as scaffolding and facilitating;
- Teaching & learning arrangements, such as the variations on team teaching (ability, preference, planning, implementation, evaluation, mentoring) and establishing learning centres;
- Student arrangements, such as cooperative group learning, ability grouping, mixed-ability grouping and mixed learning style grouping;
- The participation of families in their children's education;
- Assessment strategies, such as benchmarking, concept mapping, imbedding assessment tasks that permeate the curriculum and self-assessment;
- Reporting strategies.

One of the major practical advantages of multi-aging is that it usually creates more opportunities for student placement than otherwise. If the placement of students is restricted to single age groups and there are only enough students of a particular age group to form one class, then those students are compelled to be together.

Most teachers prefer to group students in classes that reflect a gender balance, an ability range, a spread of learning issues (such as ELL), equity in the number of students and a socio-economic range. They also desire the flexibility to be able to separate twins on request and avoid combinations of students that affect the quality of learning (such as personality clashes or possessive friendships). Multi-aged classes better allow these placement criteria to be met by providing more than one placement choice.

## **Conclusion**

The successful use of multi-level and multi-age teaching is entirely dependent on an attitude amongst educators. To gain the maximum benefit from multi-level teaching, it is also preferable that a school community embraces the values that have been skimmed over in this document. In order to embrace these values, each needs to be identified, clarified and explored in full. Such a process takes time and commitment by all stakeholders.

There is also a large element of professional trust required. Modern teachers are highly trained and informed. In International Schools, they also tend to be highly

experienced. One of the main advantages that teachers in International Schools have is access to the educational beliefs, values and practices that their international colleagues bring with them. The professional growth of teachers occurs in the context of teaching, and exposure to best practice from around the world allows them to exercise their naturally eclectic nature to best advantage. This includes exposure to multi-level and multi-age teaching.

The secret of exploring and adopting new teaching and learning paradigms is to ensure that a systematic process for continuous school improvement is a normal part of school life. Change then tends to be incremental and part of institutional growth rather than revolutionary or reformist. The most important driver of continuous school improvement is the establishment of shared values about

- Social issues;
- Educational conceptual issues;
- Organisational issues;
- Relationships.

Once these values have been established, the mission and vision of the school can continue to be defined and cyclically reviewed. The aura of values that shrouds the school is an ever-changing one that requires constant amendment as different issues arise.

Multi-level and multi-age teaching arrangements belong to the educational concept values category. They are more and more becoming a reality in our school.