

## Dealing with multi-graded classrooms

### Objectives

By the end of this session participants will be able to

- Identify the strategies of dealing with a multi-graded classroom
- Customize various techniques that help them in their own contexts
- Modify lesson plans to suit a multi-graded classroom

**Multigrade teaching – teaching classes of students not only of different ages and abilities but also at different grade levels.** Multigrade teaching is not always easy, but doing it well means that you are educating children who otherwise would not be able to go to school and therefore helping them gain the knowledge and skills they need for a more promising future.

### Managing a Multigrade Classroom

Multigrade teaching is all about classroom organization, student management, and, ultimately, the successful transmission of grade- specific curricula. It is your responsibility as a multigrade teacher to plan and organize your classroom to get the best results from the space and resources available to you.

### Adapting the Curriculum and Lesson Plans

Revisiting and redesigning the national curriculum to suit multigrade situations, according to the number of classes to be combined together, is essential for teaching the required curriculum content in a phased and continuous manner and for making it appropriate to the cultural and socio-economic context of your school. To do this, you may find these suggestions useful:

- select common themes from one subject suitable for all the grades in your multigrade classroom
- develop a flexible timetable for all the grades throughout the session on this theme
- develop daily lesson plans for each unit related to this theme with the help of textbooks and reference material as per the curriculum
- select activities linked to the curriculum that are to be conducted in the class

- develop relevant worksheets for individual or group practice ☞ relate concepts from the curriculum to examples from your students' daily lives
- prepare quizzes to assess your students' mastery of the curriculum content
- nurture talent in the school by organizing related co-curricular activities such as music, creative arts, games, and physical education

In a multigrade classroom the curriculum is best delivered in an integrated sequence of learning activities. To begin, you can concentrate on a theme, not individual subjects or grade levels. This becomes the focus for all learning activities for the whole class. You can add to the effectiveness of the integrated unit by linking it to as many different learning areas as possible. You will need to take time to become thoroughly familiar with the content materials for each theme. Work with students interested in a particular topic to explore this as it facilitates their, and your, learning. It is also important that you are systematic in planning lessons and developing teaching and learning materials relevant to each of the curriculum units.

As a multigrade teacher, you are the key to planning, designing, and managing a range of both grade-appropriate and mixed-grade activities for children to keep them engaged in learning. Your efficiency and effectiveness rest on creating a classroom conducive to learning by developing exciting and stimulating activities ranging from group work to independent study. You play a central role in managing the classroom in the following ways:

- planning the use of the classroom "space", especially flexible seating arrangements for both you and your students
- planning and carrying out multiple lessons at the same time
- designing activities for students to keep them involved
- creating, arranging, and using teaching and learning materials
- establishing norms of behaviour expected of students to keep them learning

### **Understanding the Current Context and Creating a Future Vision**

In order to realise these functions effectively, you need to focus on many levels of classroom management. This starts with an assessment of what your classroom looks like now and your vision of how you want it to look in the future.

When you first get assigned to a school which has – or should have – multigrade teaching, it is essential to take time to **gain a clear understanding of the context of your multigrade classroom**. You can start by asking yourself the following questions:

Where is your school located? How far do your students travel to get to school?

What grades are you teaching? What age and ability range is in your classroom? How might you best work with and take advantage of a wide range of ages and abilities?

What kinds of family background do your students come from? What is their economic status?

What language do your students speak at home? How well do they understand and speak the national language? What might you do to ensure they learn what they need to learn in the language you use in the classroom?

<b>Sample Lesson Plan</b>		
<b>Subject: Science Topic: Classifying living things Grade: 3-4</b>		
<b>Learning outcomes</b>	<p>By the end of this lesson, you will have:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• collected and displayed real items in a logical way in your classroom to support your students’ learning about grouping living things</li> <li>• used model building as a way of recording what your students know about different plants and animals</li> </ul>	Materials and notes

<p><b>Activity1:</b></p> <p><b>Collecting evidence of life around us</b></p> <p>Whole class</p>	<p>Tell your students that they will be developing a display to show non-living and living things around them. Explain that it would not be right to display real animals and plants. They should not damage or kill anything living. Instead, rather like detectives, they should hunt for clues and evidence of any living thing – e.g. feathers, droppings, leaves and seeds.</p> <p>Choose six things from the display – three living and three non-living – and display them on another table. Gather your students round the table and ask them which of the six things are living and how they know this. By careful questioning and discussion you should be able to draw up a list of the seven characteristics of living things. You might want to include this list of characteristics as part of the display.</p> <p>Finally, you could ask students to categorise the living things into further sub-groups: animals, plants and so on. Ask them to think about what defines each group and where each item sits in the display.</p>	<p>Give pupils several days to bring in things for the display.</p> <p>Seven characteristics of living things:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Nutrition</li> <li>Reproduction</li> <li>Growth</li> <li>Respiration</li> <li>Sensitivity</li> <li>Movement</li> <li>Excretion</li> </ul>
<p><b>Activity2:</b></p> <p><b>Building models of plants</b></p>	<p>Scientists group things by similarities and differences in the basic patterns of their structure or form.</p> <p>One way to find out what your pupils observe</p>	<p>Before this activity, ask your students to bring in scrap materials and collect some yourself. Scrap materials might include: tin, cardboard, string,</p>

<p>Small groups according to grade or ability level</p>	<p>about patterns in plants is by asking them to make models.</p> <p>Organize the scrap materials so that each group has a selection to use. Write the following instructions on the chalkboard:</p> <p>Talk about what a plant looks like</p> <p>Then make models of the plants from the scrap materials</p> <p>If higher grades or more able students finish first, work with them to develop a lexicon (a small dictionary) to show which words the students knew to describe the parts of plants that they were familiar with (you might find it helpful to put up these words round your classroom and encourage the students to use them when talking about their models).</p>	<p>tape, straws, plastic bottles, fabric, paper, netting, wire.</p>
<p><b>Simple terms</b></p> <p>Root</p> <p>Stem</p> <p>Leaf Bud</p> <p>Flower Fruit Seed</p> <p>Plumule</p>	<p><b>More advanced terms for older pupils</b></p> <p>Tap root, Side root Bark</p> <p>Vein</p> <p>Petal, Anther, Pollen, Ovule Fleshy, Dry, Case</p> <p>Radicle (baby root)</p> <p>(baby shoot)</p>	

**Developing Teaching and Learning Materials**

One of the challenging but also enjoyable tasks of being a multigrade teacher is the chance to prepare a wide range of teaching and learning materials for the grade levels and subjects you teach. To keep this organized, each set of grade-level materials can be placed in a folder including specific content to be taught and guidelines on how to teach it in the most effective way.

### **Ten Strategies**

These experiences in multigrade teaching help to reinforce the major lessons discussed above which should be useful to you, as a multigrade teacher, in ensuring the best quality learning for your students. These lessons include:

1. As a multigrade teacher, you should try first to **understand the diversity and complexity of your students** – by gender, age, family and socio-economic background, language, ability, and special education needs – and see this diversity not as a problem to be solved but as an opportunity to be used to produce better learning.
2. Given this diversity, you need to **personalize your teaching** (and eventually your assessment methods) to respond to the different backgrounds and learning styles/needs of each of your students. This includes identifying early on children who are at risk of failing and giving them the extra attention they need to make sure they succeed and stay in school.
3. You need to **make your classroom “child-friendly”**, especially for new students coming directly from their families to the school; this means not only teaching what needs to be taught but also ensuring that the classroom is healthy, welcoming, inclusive and protective of children of all different backgrounds and abilities and that your teaching is sensitive and responsive to the needs of both boys and girls and promotes student participation in the classroom.
4. If it has not already been done, you will need to **adapt the standard national curriculum** to both the local culture and context and to your multigrade situation. This may require breaking down the curriculum into themes that can be taught across grades while ensuring that students in each grade level learn what the system expects them to learn.

5. In implementing this adapted curriculum, you should try to **be creative in your management of the multigrade classroom**, arranging whole grades, mixed grades, large and small groups, pairs and space for individual work. This requires special attention to establishing routines for students to work and study independently through activity-based learning.
6. You need to **be flexible in your use of time**, moving from one kind of group to another and balancing the attention you give to strong students acting as peer tutors and weaker students needing extra attention.
7. You should try to **be innovative in the development and reproduction of teaching and learning materials** - use locally available resources and make them relevant to the local context and culture. As far as possible, you need to bring teaching closer to local conditions and available resources. The involvement of students from higher grades in designing workbooks is always helpful in making the curriculum more relevant to the local culture.
8. Where required and possible, you should **use the students' mother tongue for instruction**, ensuring initial literacy in that language (e.g. by Grade 3) and then, where appropriate, helping students transfer the literacy skills in that language to the national language(s).
9. Since you are often working in remote and isolated places, you should **take advantage of whatever resources there are around you** to help you in your work – your principal/ head teacher, parents and the local community, and other schools relatively close to your school which can form a cluster and share useful experiences, materials and lesson plans.
10. You must try to **master the other skills needed to help a small, remote, often poor (and poorly-supported) school succeed**. Multigrade teaching is a challenge in itself, but working with your teaching colleagues to make your small school “work” requires other skills as well: making do with limited resources and trying to raise more; carrying out a school self-assessment of its achievements and its needs and developing a school improvement plan; mobilizing support from impoverished and often disempowered and disinterested parents; and gaining the support of local community leaders – all of these are skills useful in schools with multigrade classrooms.

