

Split Grades, Cross-Grades and Family Groupings

By Mark Holmes

Parents and teachers are frequently mystified and worried by the different ways children are grouped in elementary school. One question that is often raised is: "What does research tell us about these different types of grouping?" Unfortunately, there is, as is so often the case, no simple answer. But that does not mean parents should relax and forget about it.

Split grades have been around for a long time. The one-room school was one big split grade. Most often, split grades are set up because the numbers of children in a school, particularly in a small school, do not fall neatly into relatively even classes. Many school boards have collective agreements limiting class size, which means that the principal has to keep students per class in a pretty even balance. Many parents, too, complain if their child is in a class of 34, when the class next door has only 25.

"But", one may ask, "What about the research?" Research cannot address in a useful way such a fine-grained question. Look at all the other variables: the teachers concerned, parental attitudes, peer attitudes, effects of friendships made and broken, instruction methodologies — these are all likely to be more powerful than a simple and often minor organizational change. If someone tells you that there is research showing either positive or negative results, be very skeptical. There are probably other explanations of the findings. But that does not mean that an individual child cannot be helped or harmed. I shall return to that later.

Cross grades and family groupings have become popular in some school boards in recent years. The disadvantage of having very diverse class composition is that focused, sequential instruction becomes difficult or impossible. It is one thing to manage three reasonably homogeneous groups and one or two individuals, but five groups and seven individuals (by learning level) cannot be effectively taught by any but the most conscientious and gifted of teachers. Most good teachers I have known have found three or four groups the most they can teach on a regular basis. For those administrators who oppose sequential instruction, this disadvantage becomes an advantage — multi-grade classes make sequential instruction of the class or large groups impossible and make individualization and small (they may as well be heterogeneous) groups normal.

Once again, I doubt that there is any large-scale research available to give any convincing research answer on this type of organization for the simple reason that there is probably no system where the idea has had widespread adoption. Once again, however, I would anticipate that in some cases other variables related to the characteristics of the teachers, the parents and the students would sometimes be more powerful than the organization itself.

Does this mean I would not care if children of my own were to be placed in a multi-grade, family grouping, or cross-grade class? Not at all. The key would be the organization for instruction in such sequential subjects as reading, writing, mathematics, French and music. Suppose my child were in a multi-grade class but was placed in an appropriate, homogeneous group for direct, sequential instruction in those key subjects. I would probably not be concerned about the over-all composition of the class.

That, of course, is highly unlikely in contemporary Canada. The very class that most requires careful structural organization for instruction (because of its heterogeneous composition) is probably the one where all the different children are learning in random ways on a vague curriculum with "integrated" subject matter, without any clear check of what and when sequential skills are learned. In that case, I would pull my child out as fast as I could — not because my child could not possibly learn in that situation, but because the odds would be stacked against her (even more so if it's "him").