

Split Classes

City schools often have large classes. Some teachers have 30-50 students in front of them. This presents its own challenges. Smaller schools without the resources to offer small classes are often forced to combine grades in the same classroom. In our own school, we have combined, at various times, 1/2, K/1/2, 1/2/3, 3/4/5, 4/5/6, 6/7, 8/9, 7/8/9, and Sr. High subjects (such as 30-1 and 30-2 in some subjects).

Sometimes, in some subjects, the students do the same curriculum, and the school cycles the courses year after year. But in many subjects, more than one curriculum is offered to the same group of students in the same time slot. This presents unique challenges for the teacher. It's generally true that a split class does require more work by the teacher. The lesson plans are more intricate, and student understanding needs to be assessed formatively more often, which often requires more marking. Certainly it requires more planning, to keep one class learning while you're teaching the other one.



Let's look at the variety of ways a teacher can deal with the problem of teaching two different lessons to a combined class, in the same time period. All of our teachers here do that, and many of them excel at it.

Actively teaching two lessons at the same time

Teachers don't do this very often ... it's hard. Ideally one or both lessons are prepared in advance, and the teacher alternates the instruction or discussion, from one side of the room to the other. I do it occasionally, and our grade 1/2 teacher tells me that she has tried it. But in order for it to work, the teacher has to have complete control, and must work hard to

keep both classes on task and paying attention. It doesn't work very well with little kids (short attention spans) or with Jr. High students (same problem, at least for some of them).

Alternating teaching with independent work

This is the method I use most often with the Math 8/9 or 7/8/9 class. Our grade 1/2 teacher uses this method a lot too. While teaching half of the class, the other half works on an assignment or project. Half-way through the period, this switches.

This method is still difficult to pull off consistently well. Once again, the teacher has to have good classroom control, so the students working independently won't disturb the active lesson. The lessons also have to be well-planned in advance, to ensure that the independent work and the lessons finish at about the same time. It also increases the amount of marking the teacher needs to do, since the independent work has to be corrected, and student progress assessed.

Teaching the same curriculum

If the classes are cycled year after year, this is easy. For example, in a split grade 1/2 class, you're teaching Social Studies 1 to the entire class one year, and Social Studies 2 the next year. Teaching strategies are modified during the year when teaching the grade 2 curriculum.

But teachers who have to teach two different curricula to the same group can also do this quite often too. The beginning of the lesson could be new for half the class, and review for the rest. Then the teacher goes on to teach new material to the second group.

Alternately, the teacher could begin the lesson with material that is very similar in both grade levels; the lower-level class will switch to independent work at some point, while for the higher-level class the instruction continues.

Both these latter methods also require careful planning, but in my experience they work well.

Separating the classes for some subjects

For grades where there is an Achievement test, sometimes the school will timetable some subjects so that they are taught separately. For example, in a 3/4/5 split during Math or LA, the grade 3 class might be alone with the teacher.

Having taught in schools where all of these methods were used at one time or another, I think I would definitely prefer a single class of 35 students, rather than a smaller class of 18 with two different curricula. It's easier. But I haven't done that in a long time; I taught for several years in Toronto before moving to Worsley, and sometimes saw classes that large. However, most of my experience has been with split classes, and while it is more work, with careful planning students can excel.

How does this affect Education students? During a practicum, you might find yourself in a school with split classes. This is a good thing! In fact, I would go so far as to encourage student teachers to request a school where this happens, at least for their beginning practicum.

Here's why.

A student teacher on a first or initial practice teaching assignment *probably won't* be expected to plan for and teach a split class. The classes will be separated. But if you do well during the first several weeks, you can ask to plan and teach some split class lessons. If you can do well at that too, not only will it give you some valuable experience, but it will make your evaluation that much more positive. Going beyond expectations is always worth the effort.

What I haven't talked about here is the use of SmartBoard technology to teach to students in front of you and in a remote location, at the same time. This is sometimes called Videoconferencing. I had a great deal of experience with this, having begun a long time ago with 'audio only' teaching, without the video.

Split classes are a fact of life in many small schools. The advantages are that there are fewer students in the classroom than in a city school, and the experience will make you a better teacher. The disadvantages? You have to constantly be on top of classroom behaviours, and the planning and evaluation takes a little longer. For the students there is no difference; a good teacher can make it work for the benefit of all.