



# Thematic Management in Small Schools

## The Itty Bitty City

I thought I never wanted to teach in anything but a single-grade classroom. The joy of creating innovative curriculum, teaching engaging lessons, and grading the normal array of eight subjects to 25 3rd graders seemed like a big enough task in itself. I could hardly imagine teaching all this content knowledge while encouraging creative critical-thinking activities in a multigrade setting. But that is exactly what I found myself doing 10 years into my teaching career. I was the principal and head teacher at a classic, red, one-room schoolhouse, complete with a bell tower, located in a rural setting. The first year, I had a total of 18 students in six grades; the next year, 21 students spanning all eight grades. How was I going to keep up with eight daily math lessons plus all the other subjects while maintaining an orderly classroom? That was my challenge.

### **Small School Characteristics**

Christian educational philosopher George R. Knight<sup>1</sup> explains that teaching is not a formula but rather an art that demands responsible thought and action by the teacher. The Christian educator has the responsibility of creating an environment where his or her students can acquire positive Christian characteristics that they can apply throughout their lives. Small schools provide an opportunity for students to experience these characteristics in a positive classroom environment with varied experiences. These can include one-on-one learning and individualized instruction, built-in mentoring of students by their peers and older students, and methods for teachers to be innovative.<sup>2</sup> Though their classes are usually smaller, most multigrade small schools use peer

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teaching and teacher aides to help manage the diversity of content and to meet individual needs. Teaching in small schools is not merely about academics, but requires particular attention to the wholistic educational needs of children. Ellen White<sup>3</sup> encouraged teachers to focus on educating the whole person, which includes the physical, mental, and spiritual aspects.

Though small schools have many advantages, understanding how to create a positive learning environment in a multigrade classroom is not always easy. The challenge is to plan and organize the classroom environment, as well as student behavior, in a way that is effective. Class organization that provides routines and encourages students to work independently are crucial qualities of a well-run, positive overall school experience.<sup>4</sup> Teachers, including those in multigrade classrooms, will discover that implementing effective management practices can result in classes that achieve high levels of on-task behavior.<sup>5</sup>

### Using Themes in Classroom Management

What is classroom management all about? Essentially, it involves teacher actions that create a learning environment which facilitates positive student interaction, effective engagement in learning, and self-motivation.<sup>6</sup> Classroom management encompasses whatever actions a teacher must take to motivate student involvement and cooperation in classroom activities to ensure a productive learning climate. Using themes with high student interest, such as animal environments, historical time periods, or Bible characters, offers several advantages: Students thereby (1) learn to make choices, interact, collaborate, and cooperate; (2) draw from their prior knowledge of the world around them and apply what they learn in meaningful contextual relationships; and (3) learn effectively in self-contained, multi-age, or departmental classrooms.<sup>7</sup> Managing a classroom around common themes can lead to more focused, effective classroom management. Teachers using this strategy plan entire classroom curricular subjects around themes, typically lasting months or longer. Shaping the curriculum around relevant themes enables students to make connections to the real world outside of school and helps them develop listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills.<sup>8</sup>

Developing schedules and routines that promote cooperation and responsibility is the key to achieving effective classroom organization, management, and discipline. Organizing resources in order to facilitate student learning and independence can be an effective management strategy. In a small-school setting, this could include categories such as (1) *class-time organization*—passing out papers, taking daily roll call, answering the phone; (2) *housekeeping jobs*—straightening desks, cleaning the bathroom, dusting, emptying trash; and (3) *planning class projects* such as Track and Field Day, holiday parties, field trips, or the weekly school newsletter. (See Carol Spalding Serna's article on special days on page 20.)

### Why Use Thematic Units for Classroom Management?

My first question when I became a multigrade teacher was: How am I going to manage the classroom in a way that meets the needs of a wide variety of ages, academic levels, learning styles, and behavioral and developmental stages? After much thought and prayer, I concluded that organizing the class around a central theme would be the best strategy. I knew that small, multigrade classes allow for groups of varying ages to work through problems collaboratively. A school-wide theme could create a fun and engaging context for group work and problem solving. Working cooperatively as a team reflects the true nature of society more than any other strategy<sup>9</sup> and thus will prepare students for the real world.

Another reason I chose to manage my small school using thematic units was the realization that when students understand more about the world around them and the place where they live, they are more likely to become actively engaged in their learning. Drawing on what they observe in their day-to-day lives leads to greater student engagement and understanding.<sup>10</sup> Providing education centered in the local community and resources is known as “place-based education.” This strategy challenges young people to think through the impact of their choices on the place where they live. Thus, teachers should choose themes that are of interest to their unique mix of students and based on local community characteristics.

### Sample Management Themes

During the years I taught in a small school, several ideas emerged as part of my attempt to develop a cohesive management plan, meet the curricular standards, align the themes with specific topics of study in both lower and upper grades, and most importantly, pique student interest. A few of our favorite themes included the following:

*Under the Sea*—The middle-level science curriculum that year covered oceans and marine populations. Our reading corner incorporated a freestanding bathtub, so I posted a piece of butcher paper with a simple outline of an ocean floor as a backdrop on the nearby wall. As we studied various science content, students added drawings depicting an ocean scene, including fish and other marine creatures, sea plants, and shells. Students added various drawings to the mural throughout the year. Class jobs and school curriculum centered on this theme, which included caring for the classroom aquarium.

*Classroom Castle*—Another year, the upper-grade social-studies content standards focused on world history during the Middle Ages, which gave us an opportunity to explore life during this time period. Students were paid wages using medieval coins in pouches designed by a parent, and were able to scale the castle wall created out of heavy-duty cardboard attached to the double-decker wooden reading loft built by another parent. Curricular components were connected to the theme and to one another: art (i.e., stained glass projects), music (learning

Gregorian chants on recorders), and thematic physical education games.

**Itty Bitty City**—Another year, the schoolroom was transformed into a small city. For stores and government buildings, I used large cardboard boxes that had holes cut for doors and windows, and which were painted in a variety of colors. Civics (social studies), math skills, and literacy training (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) all related to our urban theme.

### Creating the Itty Bitty City Management Theme

Of all the themes I used over the years, the *Itty Bitty City* theme allowed the greatest involvement by students in all grades. The key was to plan and set up the city well in advance of the start of the school year. I decided to look at the social studies, science, math, and literacy curriculum for K-4 and 5-8 to see how they could be incorporated into the theme. Combining curricular subjects is beneficial to learning in any classroom. Integrative teaching practices bring current, authentic issues to the curriculum, while at the same time embedding problem-solving strategies.<sup>11</sup> The topics of civic responsibility and government as a system appeared in both the early and the intermediate curriculum. Connections between problem solving and scientific process skills were also included in the K-8 science standards. Once the overarching themes of civic responsibility and problem solving emerged, the city began to take shape.

Using the physical “buildings” formed from the large boxes, I created specific “businesses” such as a bank, a store, and a newspaper office (see Table 1). The city concept became the basis for investigating other curricular connections such as

mathematical number operations, measurement, and data; as well as literacy connections to writing, speaking, and listening.

I rotated the specific jobs and roles assigned to students (see Appendix A) weekly or monthly. Certain jobs, such as newspaper editor or mayor, were given to students in grades 5-8 only. But for the most part, classroom jobs were assigned equitably to all students. K-2 students worked with a partner on jobs such as inspector, politician, or store clerk (see Appendices B and C for instructional material samples). This helped students make connections between various disciplines, lesson topics, and the unit theme in a real-world context. Collecting materials, securing volunteers, and being alert for additional curricular connections all ensured a smooth-running “city” throughout the year.

Foundational to the management theme was the goal of producing better citizens for this earth and of preparing them for eternity. This integration of faith and learning enriched a relevant curriculum with guidance in how to serve God with all our hearts and minds.<sup>12</sup> Weekly city meetings and worship led by the “city” pastor helped to develop students’ leadership skills and enhanced their understanding of their faith while encouraging them to develop a Christ-centered worldview. Fulfilling the responsibilities of a city management team also taught students about serving others. According to George Knight, a major task of Christian schools is to give students the opportunity to discover their gifts so that they can find their place in service to others.<sup>13</sup>

**Key Features.** Though it would require too much space to describe all of the details involved with implementing a thematic unit, Table 1 offers suggestions for developing this theme, based on my experience with the *Itty Bitty City*.

**Table 1. *Itty Bitty City* Organization Plan**

<b>Classroom Set-Up</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• During the summer before implementation, ask parents and church members to collect and paint large rectangular boxes (such as ones for a refrigerator or large cabinet). Decorating the boxes can be a fun back-to-school activity.</li> <li>• Invite church and community partners to donate items for the store and other city components. This will promote the environmental concepts “reduce/reuse/recycle.”</li> <li>• Set up a job list and rotate responsibilities weekly (see Appendix A).</li> <li>• Create “checkbooks” for students, which they will use to write checks and balance their register throughout the project (see Appendix B).</li> <li>• Create play money to pay students for assigned tasks such as turning in their weekly homework folder, completing daily/weekly chores, and staying on task. Money is also used to teach about tithing and donating to class projects. Church and community members can be invited to match funds given by students.</li> </ul>
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Purchase ticket booklets for city “peace officers”—usually one or two older students who monitor and enforce classroom issues such as noise levels during work time as well as obedience to traffic laws, safety procedures during fire drills, and student-created class rules. (How you use the peace officers depends on your philosophy of classroom management.)</li> </ul>
<p><b>City Components (painted cardboard structures and/or signs)</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Post Office.</b> <i>Purpose:</i> Selling stamps (stickers), and sending and receiving inter-class mail such as postcards and letters.</li> <li>• <b>Stores.</b> <i>Purpose:</i> Selling teacher-purchased/community-donated items (erasers, pens, etc.) or student-created items (candles, bookmarks, etc. made in art class); redeeming coupons, and collecting “money” to purchase school supplies.</li> <li>• <b>Bank.</b> <i>Purpose:</i> Depository for weekly “paychecks” and student savings accounts.</li> <li>• <b>City Hall.</b> <i>Purpose:</i> Reporting student concerns, collecting taxes and fines for traffic tickets, and meeting with city leaders.</li> <li>• <b>Library.</b> <i>Purpose:</i> Checking out books and hanging out with reading buddies.</li> <li>• <b>Newspaper Office.</b> <i>Purpose:</i> Collecting news items, planning and publishing the Friday newsletter.</li> <li>• <b>Church.</b> <i>Purpose:</i> Class pastor plans Friday worship, which could include collection of tithe envelopes with student tithes and offerings from the week’s “paycheck.”</li> <li>• <b>Stoptlight</b> (working lights on wooden post created by a parent with building skills). <i>Purpose:</i> Serves as a noise-level indicator—Red = silence; Yellow = OK to whisper; Green = OK to talk.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Materials</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Three to five refrigerator-size boxes</li> <li>• Stickers, envelopes, and paper to use for post office mail</li> <li>• Store items to purchase</li> <li>• Computer for weekly newsletter publication</li> <li>• “Checkbooks” and other banking resources (see Appendix B)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Student Roles</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pastor, store clerk, librarian (see Appendix A for a detailed list) and other jobs needed for running a city—be creative.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Teacher and/or Aide Role</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chair weekly city council to discuss management issues and concerns. Meeting usually follows Friday worship. Older students can chair this meeting after the first month or quarter.</li> <li>• Monitor and change jobs weekly to allow students to experience all aspects of running the city.</li> <li>• Problem-solve disputes as a supreme court justice might.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Curricular Connections</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Social Studies</b>—civic responsibility, government, economics, community resources</li> <li>• <b>Science</b>—systems, investigation, problem solving</li> <li>• <b>Mathematics</b>—number operations, counting and cardinality, telling time, measurement and data, etc.</li> <li>• <b>Literacy</b>—reading, writing, speaking, listening, language</li> <li>• <b>Art, Music, Physical Education</b>—many connections to creating, performing, and personal health</li> </ul>

<b>Resources/ Personnel</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parents</li> <li>• Church members, including school board members</li> <li>• Retirees</li> <li>• Local businesses</li> <li>• City library</li> <li>• City officials</li> </ul>
<b>Tips</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Allow plenty of time—the more details completed before school, the smoother the implementation.</li> <li>• Allow younger students to be assistants to older students on various jobs.</li> <li>• Build partnerships with families and community members.</li> <li>• Connect the theme to the science, social studies, art, physical education, and music curriculum—areas that do not get as much content time as math or literacy.</li> </ul>

### Appendix A. Student City Roles List\*

<i>Itty Bitty City</i> Job Title	Job Description
<b>Pastor</b>	Lunch blessing, Friday worship
<b>Inspector</b>	Job checker
<b>Waiters</b>	Wash lunch tables
<b>Receptionist</b>	Answer phone, take messages, open door
<b>Sanitation Engineers</b>	Clean toilets
<b>Plumber</b>	Clean sinks
<b>Politician</b>	Raise and lower flag, chair class meetings
<b>Librarian</b>	Assist in checking out books, straighten books on shelves
<b>Mail Carrier</b>	Collect school mail, deliver inter-class mail
<b>Coach</b>	Organize sports equipment
<b>Scientist/Zoologist</b>	Care for class pets
<b>Construction Worker</b>	Move desks and other classroom furniture
<b>Heavy Equipment Operator</b>	Vacuum classroom, move desks for vacuuming
<b>Chef</b>	Take lunch count, clean microwave
<b>Trash Collector</b>	Empty garbage cans
<b>Window Washer</b>	Clean whiteboards and windows
<b>Mayor</b>	Lead Friday city council meeting, collect comments
<b>Editor</b>	Oversee weekly newspaper and staff (7th-8th graders)
<b>Postmaster</b>	Collect and deliver mail dropped in the post office box
<b>Store Clerk</b>	Manage the purchase and stocking of store items
<b>Banker</b>	Manage class store, collect and count “money”

\*Jobs may be combined, expanded, or eliminated based on student enrollment and specific setting.

## Appendix B. City Banking Resources

### 1-Paychecks

[Small School Name]  
Mrs. Muthersbaugh, City Manager  
123 Muthersville Street  
Itty Bitty City, [State] 54321



Date \_\_\_\_\_

Pay to the Order of \_\_\_\_\_

Payment Amount \_\_\_\_\_ \$ \_\_\_\_\_ . \_\_\_\_\_

City Job \_\_\_\_\_ Signed \_\_\_\_\_

### 2-Jesus Savings Bank Deposit Slip

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_ Acct. # \_\_\_\_\_

Deposit Amount \$ \_\_\_\_\_ Teller Signature \_\_\_\_\_

### 3-Jesus Savings Bank Account Register

Account Name \_\_\_\_\_ Account # \_\_\_\_\_

Date	Transaction Description	Deposit	Withdrawal	Balance

## Appendix C. Classroom Management Resources

### Resource Links

### Content Overview

“Managing and Organizing the Multigrade Classroom” (Seventh-day Adventist Curriculum and Instruction Resource Center, 2000-2014): <http://circle.adventist.org/browse/resource.phtml?leaf=19357>

Link to a presentation on the well-managed classroom, including printable classroom-management resources.

“Multigrade Teaching: Classroom Organisation and Management” (The Commonwealth of Learning, 2000): [http://www.col.org/stamp/Module02\\_Part1.pdf](http://www.col.org/stamp/Module02_Part1.pdf)

Teaching, management, and assessment strategies for the multi-grade classroom.

*Practical Tips for Teaching Multigrade Classes* (UNESCO, 2013): <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0022/002201/220101e.pdf>

Promotes inclusive, learning-friendly environments with tips for managing, teaching, and assessing multigrade programs.

Richard G. Maloon, “Microsociety—Building Character Through Experience,” *The Journal of Adventist Education* 61:1 (October/November 1998):32-36: <http://circle.adventist.org/files/jae/en/jae199861013205.pdf>.  
Website for Microsociety: <http://microsociety.org>.

Students learn responsibility, citizenship, and cooperation while developing their own business in a self-made government during one 50-minute class per school day.

## What I Learned

Thematic units as a classroom-management tool can be summed up as follows: *collaboration*, *context*, and *critical thinking*. Students in this multi-age, multigrade school had to *collaborate* to make their city function. They pulled together in a way similar to a city unit itself, working hard on various projects, communicating ideas and needs, and celebrating together their individual and group successes. Experiencing the year's theme, whether undersea adventure, living in a castle, or an *Itty Bitty City*, put them in a real-world *context*. Learning how government works and their role in running a city helped emphasize each student's own importance and voice in the process. Finally, students' experience with integration among a variety of subjects required high-level *critical-thinking* skills. Every day, they were able to problem-solve situations, explore and understand various roles, and make connections with multiple components of the selected classroom theme.

**Implications for the multigrade, small-school teacher:** Use of themes can improve student engagement, encourage them to take ownership of their classroom environment, and develop skills related to real-world scenarios. Although engaging students in their own learning can be a challenge, it is vital to their academic success.<sup>14</sup> The themes explored in this small-school management experience provided emotional engagement as well as motivation for learning. Student ownership was revealed not only in their motivation to care for their school environment, but also in the way they conducted themselves throughout the day. They truly cared about their "city" and empathized with its citizens.

Finally, using the community theme highlighted the importance of the children's hometown in a real-world setting. This affirmed Vygotsky's findings that learning is best accomplished by completing tasks in the social contexts of day-to-day living.<sup>15</sup> Those contexts can include the Christian school as a faith community. Integrating our faith with academic learning helps us better understand human nature and develop the whole person—heart, soul, and mind.<sup>16</sup> The purpose of education is to help students learn to think for themselves while at the same time directing their minds toward God.<sup>17</sup>

Though preparation and implementation can take some time, I highly recommend using thematic classroom management for small schools. Using the *Itty Bitty City* classroom-management template, my students and I experienced the joys and challenges of working together toward common goals and thinking through problems related to academic, relational, and spiritual issues—which helped to ensure a wholistic education for each child. ✍



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### NOTES AND REFERENCES

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17. White, *Education*, op. cit., p. 13.

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