

Components of a Successful Multiage Classroom

An eight year old and a six year old read together on the floor of the classroom, holding a book between them. The older child reads a page to the younger one, then invites him to read. When the younger child has trouble with a word, the older child says the first sound to help the little one out.

A seven year old reads a rough draft of a story she has written to an eight year old. The older child says, "I like the way your story ends." The younger child asks for help with spelling.

A six year old wants to write a letter to his fifth-grade brother during writing time. The teacher is busy with another student, so he goes to his classroom buddy for help. His classroom buddy is a seven-year old who was in the class last year. She knows how to use the letter writing materials, and is able to help the younger child begin his task.

A second grader and two first graders read poetry together from charts on the wall, taking turns using a pointer.

Four first, second, and third graders work together at a writing center. The first grader is drawing a picture for a story. One second grader chooses a sticker for a writing prompt; the other second grader is halfway through a story he started the day before. The third grader is publishing one of her stories by making a book.

Interactions such as these are daily occurrences in the Multiage Primary classroom I share with a teaching partner and thirty-eight children in first, second, and third grades. Our children sometimes work on collaborative projects independent of grade level designation; other times they work on grade-specific work. Whatever they are doing, they work alongside each other throughout the day, sharing materials, ideas, and expertise.

In the four years I have worked in this collaborative situation, I have come to believe that there are three main components which enable a successful multiage environment: structure, philosophy, and support.

The term *Multiage* is one which can be used indiscriminately to label a variety of classroom structures. Some use the term *multiage classroom* to describe any

classroom in which there are children of more than one grade or age, including mixed-grade classes which are created for economic reasons. For example, when there are not enough students for each of two grades, the grades may be combined into one class, with the teacher teaching two separate curriculums to the two groups. The next year, as school demographics change, these temporary classes are dissolved and the children move back into single grade classes. These classes are usually called *combination* or *mixed-grade* classes rather than multiage classes. The basic structure of a true multiage learning environment is one in which the teacher views the entire class as one learning community and which supports students staying with the same teacher for more than one year.

One of the greatest benefits of a multiage classroom results when students remain in the same class for more than one year. When children have this opportunity, there is a minimum of beginning-of-the-year transition time because most of the students know the procedures and the teacher knows where the majority of students were performing at the end of the previous year. Instead of spending weeks getting to know all the students personally and academically, a teacher only needs to assess the new students who have entered the class each year.

Encouraging continuing students to mentor the new ones in classroom procedures makes for even less transition time for the new students. Procedures do not need to be explained repeatedly because many of the students already know how the class "works" and are able to teach the new students where to find supplies, how to head their papers, how to use the tape recorder, where to store personal items, how to collaborate on story-writing, and so on. This makes the beginning of the year easier for the teacher and students alike.

The familiarity of students with each other is another benefit of having students continue on in the same multiage classroom. When students work alongside each other day after day, even the youngest, shyest children become comfortable asking for help from older students. As older students teach younger ones the procedures, read them stories, and help them write their names, they develop valuable leadership skills and nurturing behaviors.

The multiage philosophy accepts that students of a particular age or grade will be working at a variety of academic and developmental levels. This acceptance is supported by the set-up of an environment which offers materials and learning strategies which include individual as well as group needs. Thematic lessons and concepts may be presented to the group as a whole, with different expectations for students of different levels and abilities. Students may work in flexible, ever-changing small groups based on ability rather than age or grade, so cross-age collaborations are accepted and encouraged. As a result,

the lines between grades and ages start to become invisible. Students sometimes work in groups delineated by age, grade, or ability, but the overall structure is one which looks at the children as one group of learners with varying levels of needs.

The success of this combination of individualized learning, small group collaborations, and whole group interactions is dependent on the development of self-direction and independence in the children. This may be acquired by setting up centers with task cards, bins of individualized learning games, a classroom library of leveled books, shelves of math manipulative materials and games, a science discovery center with task cards, an art supply shelf, and a supply shelf with paper, staplers, tape, markers, and pencil sharpeners which children can access as needed. When students are not dependent on their teacher to meet all their needs, they are empowered to take ownership of the classroom environment and to develop individual responsibility for the classroom community. The interplay between older and younger students in the same classroom can facilitate this development of self-directed behavior as older students provide models for younger students.

The whole language philosophy is a wonderfully compatible fit with the multiage classroom, especially in relation to the ring of authenticity brought to the classroom. In the real world outside of the classroom we seldom, if ever, find ourselves working with people who are all our same age. In any work environment, there are those who are more experienced and those who are still learning the ropes. In a multiage classroom, the older, more experienced students become mentors for younger students who are still learning what school is all about. In relation to literacy experiences, this can be especially evident, as exemplified by the following second-week-of-school exchange between an emergent-writing second grader and three strong third grade writers, all of whom were in our class the previous year:

Second grade Michael reads his watermelon story aloud to me, and I notice it ends with an incomplete sentence. I praise Michael's work and suggest that he share it with three third grade girls who are writing stories together at a table to see if they have any suggestions. We go to ask the girls if they would mind listening to his story. The boy confidently reads his story aloud. Vanessa tells him she likes the word "juicy." He is asked to read the story again. This time, Karen has a quizzical expression on her face. When I ask if she has a question, she says that it doesn't make sense at the end, where it says, "I like watermelon because when you make it." Vanessa and Kayla agree that it needs more, but Michael doesn't know what they mean. I ask if anyone can make a suggestion. Vanessa says, "You can say, 'when you make it, it tastes good.'" Michael smiles. I remind him that he needs to thank them for the

suggestion, which he does, and that if he likes the suggestion he can add it to his last sentence. He does so, and his story is complete.

Collaborations such as these between children of different ages and ability levels demonstrate the benefits, both academic and social, of a true multiage environment in which children of different ages are encouraged to work as individuals as part of one learning community.

When I tell people that I team teach in a multiage primary class with first, second, and third graders, I usually get a reaction that includes the question, "Why?" This is an important question which always makes me smile, because it reminds me that the idea of children of different ages working together in one classroom is a very unusual concept to many people. For a multiage classroom to survive and flourish, support is needed from the parent community as well as central and site administration.

Unfortunately, my partner and I learned this the hard way.

When we met, I was a third grade teacher and Ziem Nguyen was a first grade teacher. We began collaborating, having the wall removed between our adjacent classrooms, consolidating materials, and encouraging our students to move freely among each other. After having done so for two years, with the blessing of our site and district administrators, we decided to officially designate ourselves a multiage classroom. We assumed that because we were already had been doing so anyway, it was just a natural next step. How wrong we were!

Within a month of a presentation to our staff, describing what we had been doing and how we planned to continue to develop our program, a few concerned parents began disseminating incorrect, negative information about our proposed program. Consequently, we spent a whole summer conducting informational meetings, explaining our structure, curriculum and goals, and answering questions of parents who had become concerned about their children's possible placement in our classroom; this concern had been generated by the false information which had been publicized in our community. Because the students in our classroom would be selected the same as the rest of the classes in the school, with a commitment to a heterogeneous mix, we had no plans to fill our class through requests only.

When fall arrived, seven parents wanted their children taken out of our class. The principal decided to move three children because of family concerns, but left the rest in our classroom. When parents called with concerns, we invited them in to help in the classroom or to observe. We took the time to explain what the children were doing and how we met individual needs. Once parents began seeing the work their children were doing, and finding that their fears

were unfounded, we began to receive notes and phone calls from now-happy parents. One example clearly stands out in my mind:

A parent complained because her second-grade daughter had been placed in our class. She even called the district office to try to have her daughter's class placement changed, but district administrators supported our principal's decision to keep the child in our class. Mom came to me to express her concerns, so I explained how the class worked and invited her to come to observe. She began working in the classroom the second week of school. On Back-To-School Night, one month after school started, she surprised me by speaking up when parents had questions about why we were teaching all these grades in one classroom. She told the parents that she was very impressed with the work the children were doing and how well they worked together. She continued to become one of our most supportive classroom volunteers, spending two hours a week in our classroom, willing to help with any kinds of jobs we needed done. Over a year later, during her daughter's second year with us, she came to me to tell me that they were thinking of moving to another state, but she wanted her daughter in another multiage class -- that she didn't want her in a single grade class again.

If we had known when we started our program what we know now, we would probably have made fewer assumptions about what parents knew about our classroom. We had assumed that because so many parent volunteers spend so many hours in our school, and because each of us had developed a supportive parent base, that everyone knew what we were already doing in our classroom. We didn't realize that what we were doing was so unusual or frightening to parents who were used to a more traditional setting.

But it wasn't only parents who had concerns about our program. After we presented our proposal to our staff, many questions were asked about how children would be selected for the class, how it would affect the rest of the school, and what impact it would have on other teachers. Some teachers were immediately supportive, while others were more skeptical. We knew we needed to work hard to make sure we were accepted and viewed as part of the overall team and not put ourselves in a position of needing or getting any special treatment because of our alternative program within this otherwise traditional environment. In order to continuously work for staff support, we found that we sometimes needed to make some compromises and make sure that we supported others when that support was needed.

A successful multiage classroom takes much initial and ongoing planning. When creating the structure, attention must be given to how the students will

be selected, keeping in mind that the best scenario is one which has as many children as possible continue in the class for more than one year, in order to gain the variety of benefits that a multiage environment provides. When planning curriculum, lessons, and schedules, focus needs to be toward the philosophy that views children as working on a continuum regardless of age or grade, and which views the whole classroom as one community of learners. When these two components are carefully planned and the goals are constantly kept in focus, they can be explained and even demonstrated to parents and others who may not be familiar with a multiage learning environment. When parents and other members of the community understand the goals and benefits of a multiage classroom, they are likely to be supportive; in fact, it has been our experience that some even become advocates.

Why do I teach multiage?

Why, indeed.

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