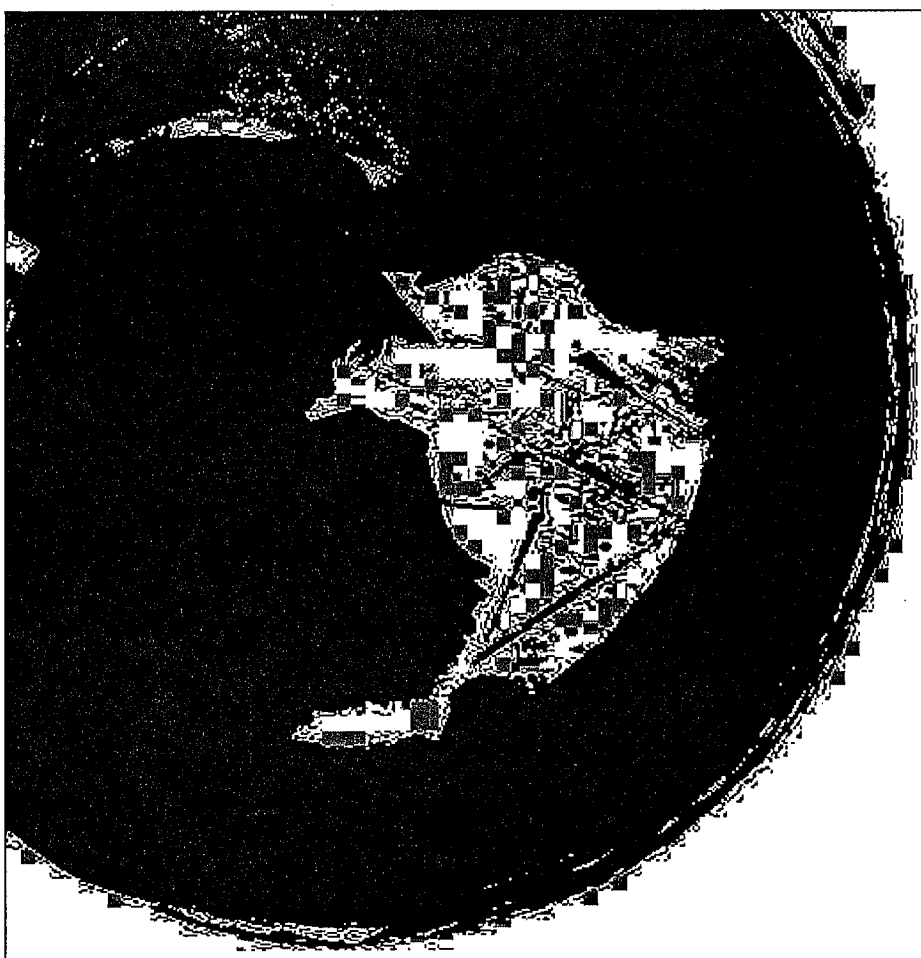

Early years curriculum materials

Multi-age learning and teaching

Queensland Government

Learning and teaching in a multi-age classroom

In Queensland there are many schools that have mixed-age classes. Some of these schools have chosen to organise their classrooms by deliberately grouping children in multi-age groups.

Multi-age grouping is just one of the devices used to organise classrooms in Queensland schools. It is the deliberate mixing of children from various age groups of more than one year in the one class. Multi-age groupings are also known by other terms, e.g. vertical, family and heterogeneous groupings.

What are the benefits for teachers and children?

Research has highlighted the **benefits** for both teachers and children when learning and teaching in a multi-age classroom. Benefits include more holistic, child-responsive curriculum practices that consider the understandings, capabilities and dispositions that children need for future work, e.g. working in diverse environments that seek workers who are multi-skilled, literate, cooperative, creative, adaptable, independent and resourceful.

Children and teachers usually have the opportunity to work together for more than one year, which enhances continuity of learning and the forming of positive relationships with teachers and children, and between children.

Because of the mixed age group, the younger children benefit from the positive models of older children, often aspiring to their levels of capability. At the same time, the older children rise to the expectations of the younger children and teacher, being very responsible and having opportunities to lend and use their expertise.

Social constructivist and critical perspectives of learning and teaching (upon which the *Early Years Curriculum Guidelines* is developed), affirm the use of a multi-age classroom approach. Strategies used in this approach include:

- recognising and building on children's diverse backgrounds, understandings and experiences
- understanding how children learn
- building connectedness between learning experiences
- acknowledging children as unique individuals with diverse and complex identities
- recognising children as active "agents" of their own learning.

What does learning look like in a multi-age classroom?

Children, teachers, parents and other partners:

- acknowledge and engage with each other's diverse knowledge through *child-initiated and teacher-initiated learning experiences*
- talk about, represent, reflect on, and begin to evaluate aspects of their learning with others
- work on activities independently and in a range of groupings, e.g. pairs, small groups, whole group
- build *co-operative learning skills*, e.g. sharing, turn-taking, listening, mentoring, negotiating, considering alternative points of view, mediating and resolving conflict in social situations
- work with others at times who have *similar* or *different* capabilities, needs and interests to deepen and extend *understandings* and make links between prior and new experiences
- actively *investigate* topics of personal interest, using inquiry-based learning to aid meaning-making about aspects of local and global communities
- explore a range of *thinking skill programs and strategies* to assist in investigation of topics/problems of personal interest, e.g. learning styles/capabilities (De Bono's "Six Thinking Hats" and Gardner's "Multiple Intelligences"); PMI (plus, minus, interesting); what if?; sort/group/label; role play; and mapping (mind maps, concept maps)

- engage purposefully with literacies that are reflective of children's everyday lives, e.g. print and electronic texts, environmental print and information technologies
- consider their roles as members of a "*community of learners*" where risk taking, making choices, making errors and challenging thinking are seen as important to aid co-construction of learning
- assume role of "*mentors*", facilitating and scaffolding each other's learning
- reflect on their sense of self as *lifelong learners*, building understandings about what, how and why they learn.

What does teaching look like in a multi-age classroom?

Teachers, parents and other partners:

- use the links between levels of curriculum frameworks to plan a seamless curriculum
- view children as *capable, inquisitive* learners who construct meanings about their world in partnership with others
- view learning as an *interconnected, ongoing, lifelong* process that is not limited to a rigid, prescribed curriculum, but one which is responsive and which dynamically reflects the learning community
- describe learning as "*phases of learning*", rather than as "age or year level appropriate" learning
- use authentic *assessment practices* that engage with children's diverse understandings, capabilities and dispositions, and empower and assist children to begin to assess their own and others' learning
- foster ongoing, authentic *partnerships* that engage with *children's families*, e.g. siblings may also be members of the multi-age class, and parents, family and other community members are actively involved in participating in the learning experiences with children and aspects of curriculum decision making
- foster ongoing, authentic *partnerships* that engage with *other classes and school/community members*, e.g. active involvement in school/community activities such as buddy class visits, Under Eight's Week, Education Week, Book Week, school assemblies, environmental conservation and social/cultural activities
- place an emphasis on *how* children learn and the *types of learning environments and contexts for learning* that support and extend this learning to aid children's growing independence and "sense of self" as learners
- investigate *alternative teaching approaches and strategies* through action research and professional development as part of critical reflection on teaching practices
- actively *facilitate* children's learning by investigating diverse ways of knowing, thinking and doing
- *scaffold* children's learning in a range of settings and contexts for learning using *explicit and diverse techniques*, e.g. questioning, prompting, modelling, demonstrating, comparing, contrasting, generating, clarifying and confirming
- work purposefully with children in *selected* (according to capabilities, needs and interests) groups or individually to scaffold their learning
- acknowledge and engage with "*continuities*", i.e. deliberate consideration of the continuity of programs and curriculum to aid children's transition between education and care contexts.

What does the research say about multi-age learning and teaching?

- Teachers concentrate on what children can do, rather than what they can't do. There is never any fear of failure, which builds confidence.
- Competition is removed from the classroom. There is no comparison with other children and children are always ready to "have a go".
- Children are allowed to make choices and express themselves in many ways. Creative activities are common.
- Children's ideas are welcomed, and can be tried out. Children feel good about themselves, which makes an excellent environment for learning.
- There is freedom of choice and exploration of many ideas, which makes learning an exciting and real part of children's lives.
- Children enter a class where there are older children, so settling in is much easier. Older children are usually delighted to help younger ones, and this helps them to feel very worthwhile and important. Confidence grows.
- Children mix freely and are encouraged to work and play together. They learn the joys of cooperation, which leads to good citizenship.

The following organisational strategies are useful for multi-age teaching and learning:

- schedules and routines that promote clear, predictable instructional patterns, especially those that enhance student responsibility for their own learning and flexible use of time
- use group learning experiences across and within year levels
- develop skills and strategies that allow children to have a high level of independence and efficiency in learning individually or in combination with others
- develop strategies and routines where children serve as "teachers" to others within and across different year levels (peer tutoring).

Note: Summaries based on Lester, Nita C. 2005, *Journal of Multiage Education*, Vol. 1, No 3.