

Strategies for teaching children in multiage classrooms.

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The multiage classroom is becoming an increasingly popular way to restructure schools. Kentucky, for example, has mandated multiage classrooms in all primary grades (K-3). Mississippi and Oregon have similar mandates. Alaska, California, Florida, Georgia, New York, Pennsylvania, Tennessee and Texas are also considering implementation of multiage classrooms (Gaustad, 1992; Kentucky Department of Education, 1992; Lodish, 1992).

In a multiage classroom a group of mixed-age children stay with the same teacher for several years. Typical primary grade age groups are 5-6-7, 6-7-8 or 7-8-9. The children spend three years with the same teacher (Connell, 1987). While the current multiage movement generally focuses on the primary years, multiage classrooms are also being implemented in upper elementary classes with age groups of 8-9-10 and 9-10-11.

Multiage teachers are frequently asked, "How does one teach students with such a wide range of abilities?" The question implies that teaching several grades of children is impractical and too difficult. On the surface, teaching mixed ages does appear to be overwhelming.

Successful multiage classrooms require teachers to shift attention from teaching curriculum to teaching children. A multiage class requires teachers to consider children as individuals, each with his or her own continuum of learning. Teachers who try to teach grade-specific curriculum to multiple-grade classrooms may become frustrated and often return to same-age classrooms. Teachers who have instituted appropriate instructional strategies, however, find multiage classes to be exhilarating and professionally rewarding. What are some teaching strategies that will help make multiage classroom teaching successful?

Process Approach to Learning

A key factor in multiage classrooms' success is the use of a process approach to education. This approach emphasizes teaching children, rather than curriculum. Each child is treated as a whole person with a distinct continuum of learning and developmental rate and style. The teacher focuses on developing children's social skills and on teaching broad academic subjects such as reading, writing and problem-solving. Each goal reflects a developmental process, not the learning of discrete skills in a prescribed curriculum.

To facilitate the writing process, for example, the teacher provides daily opportunities to write. First, she models writing and includes broad-based writing conventions. The children's writing is based on their individual developmental continuum. The younger child may write one sentence, using only beginning sounds, while the older child may write paragraphs.

The teacher also provides daily opportunities for children to read. Children read independently and in large and small groups. In large groups, the teacher presents a shared reading experience and focuses on broad-based skills, such as recognizing initial consonants, predicting outcomes and finding compound words. In small groups, the teacher chooses teaching points to fit the children's individual needs, nurturing effective reading strategies and increased comprehension.

Opportunities for children to use math are also available. Children studying dinosaurs, for example, may choose to set up a dinosaur store. Younger children learn to distinguish between nickels and dimes or to compute how many dimes are needed to buy a 30-cent dinosaur. Older children may try more complex calculations, such as adding a series of numbers.

A teacher using the process approach provides opportunities, open-ended activities, experiences or projects in which all the children can participate on their own developmental levels. The strategy is to provide the context where the learning process occurs. Children learn to read by reading, and to write by writing, in meaningful and relevant contexts. The process approach helps children to see themselves as progressive, successful learners.

Facilitator of Learning

The teacher must become a facilitator of learning in order to successfully implement a multiage classroom. A teacher must guide, nurture and support the learning process. Rather than acting simply as the "giver of knowledge," she must facilitate each child's growth in all areas according to individual developmental needs and interests. Therefore, teachers must know the children. A teacher can guide a younger child to use beginning sounds in writing only if she knows where the child is in the writing process. By facilitating learning, the teacher focuses on teaching children, not curriculum.

An Integrated Curriculum

Teachers choose an integrated curriculum in multiage classrooms that not only applies a holistic approach to learning, but also provides an excellent context for the process of learning. Teachers and/or children select a yearly, quarterly, monthly or even weekly theme. Children's reading, writing, problem-solving, graphing, measuring, painting and playing are based upon that thematic choice. As Connell (1987) notes, "integrating a curriculum around a theme allows children of different ages and stages to work together in a group as well as to practice skills at different levels".

Appropriate Learning Environment

The learning environment should permit all children to engage in the processes of learning. Such an environment includes active, hands-on learning experiences that are

based on children's interests and choices. The center and/or the project approach is very effective in multiage classrooms. Centers may include library, writing, listening, art, play, science, social science, social studies, math, drama and computers.

Using bears as a theme, children at the writing center might create stories based on a group reading of "Goldilocks and the Three Bears." At the listening center, children may choose from a selection of fictional and non fictional stories about bears or related themes. Younger children at the science center could classify bears by type, while older children write descriptive paragraphs for each bear. At the play center, children of mixed ages can dramatize "Goldilocks and the Three Bears." Mixed-age groups could also design and build bear habitats or create a poster campaign to inform the public about endangered bear species.

Children choose their own open-ended activities and monitor their own time. The teacher is free to work with the children in small groups or individually as they become autonomous learners in charge of their own learning. The center and/or project approach allows children to be involved in active, hands-on learning within the social context of mixed ages.

Cross-age Learning

An effective multiage classroom encourages opportunities for cross-age learning. Social interaction in mixed-age groupings positively affects all areas of a child's development. Vygotsky (1978) suggests that children's learning can be enhanced by adults or more capable peers. In a multiage classroom where cooperation replaces competition, older children become mentors to younger children. A multiage classroom is not effective if the children are predominantly isolated in same-age groups or even same-ability groups. Cooperative learning groups and peer tutoring are effective strategies. Collaboration through social interaction positively affects the children's learning.

Flexible Groupings

The predominant instructional strategy in multiage classrooms relies on small, flexible groupings. Children spend most of their class time in small groups, pairs or on their own.

While children participate in independent, cooperative groupings at centers or projects, the teacher works with small groups characterized by student needs or interests. For example, a teacher may conduct a literature study with a mixed-ability grouping, gather beginning readers together for support on using reading strategies and engage another group that showed interest in solving a particular problem. She may work individually with a child needing help in letter recognition. The breakdown of small groupings and independent study is not based on a predetermined, prescribed curriculum, but rather on the needs and interests of the children.

There is very little large-group instruction in the multiage classroom. Large group instruction times do provide a forum for broad-based skills. These instructional times allow for a wider curriculum presentation. Multiage teachers are amazed at how opening up the curriculum engages children to whom they ordinarily would not have presented certain concepts or skills.

Portfolio Assessment

Because the multiage classroom approach frees teachers to see children as individuals and relies on process learning, a new type of assessment is necessary. Portfolio assessment is an ideal strategy for documenting the progress of each child. Children are assessed according to their own achievement and potential and not in comparison with other children (Goodlad & Anderson, 1987). The teacher holds different expectations for different children, does not grade portfolios and relies on using report cards that are narrative, rather than traditional.

Portfolios also help the teacher support and guide instruction. The authentic assessments in the portfolio enable teachers to know their students' strengths as well as areas that need further development. Portfolio assessment is an excellent tool for communicating with children and parents. It allows children to see themselves as successful learners and parents to better understand the learning process.

Conclusion

Strategies such as the process approach to learning, teacher as facilitator, appropriate learning environments, cross-age learning, flexible groupings and portfolio assessment all help teachers focus on teaching children. These strategies support the implementation of a successful and effective multiage program.

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