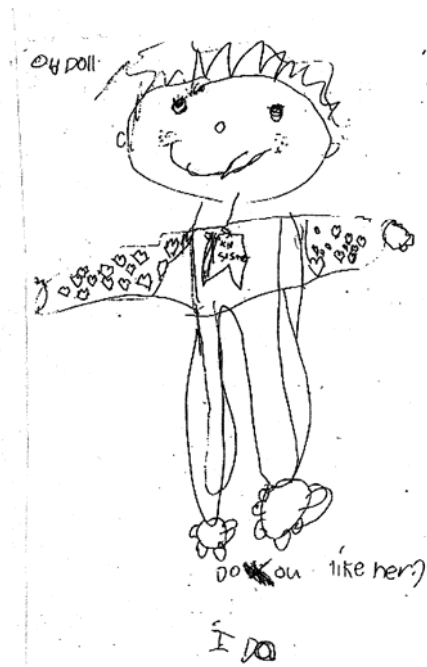


# MEREDITH'S 'OLD DOLL'

## A MOTHER'S PLEA FOR MULTIAGE STRUCTURES

by  
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Last summer, we drove our 12 year old daughter, Meredith, to Berwick to attend another Junior Choir Camp. She has been attending this camp (for children ages 8 - 13) every summer since she was 8 years old, and so has "Old Doll" - her nightly bed companion since she was 6 months old. Meredith had just completed her first year at Evangeline Middle School in grade 6.

We arrived at the camp early, completed the registration and proceeded to the cabin she was assigned. Her cabin counselor greeted her with a welcome smile and announced that she was the first to arrive. We decided to wait with her until some of the other campers arrived. Meredith seemed a little apprehensive so I suggested that we busy ourselves, setting up her bed. Noticing the lump at the bottom of her sleeping bag, I started to reach in to investigate; but Meredith blocked my attempt, quietly saying that it was just 'Old Doll'.

It wasn't long until the next camper arrived - a 9 year old, with her doll tucked under her arm. Meredith's face broke into a relieved smile as she was introduced; then reached into her sleeping bag to pull 'Old Doll' up to her pillow.

I have been a teacher of Multiage classes for a long time - 26 years - and over that time have done extensive research and pedagogical analysis to develop an effective learning environment for children that also is compatible with our provincial curriculum guidelines. I have gained a reputation in Nova Scotia as a multiage guru, and I am frequently invited to speak to groups of parents, administrators and teachers about Multiage Teaching/Learning. It is reassuring for parents and educators 'new' to this educational structure and for those involved in small schools to listen to someone that is so convinced of the benefits of a nongraded philosophy.

But I had a lot of doubts early in my career as a 'multiage teacher'. In 1973, when 2 colleagues and I started 'Vertical Grouping' (modeled after The British Infant School) at our 'streamed' elementary school, we had very little literature available to us to read. It was prior to the 'Whole Language' movement, integration, and early into the 'continuous progress' policy in Nova Scotia. We were fortunate that our supervisor, Dr. George Forsyth promised the parent community to do a comparative study of the learning development of children in the multiage classes and the single age classes. He spent time observing our classes, meeting with us, and 'reflecting' back to us our methods, language, and program, constantly challenging us to analyze what we were doing and to create more effective ways to accommodate the diversity of learning in our classes.

Working with children for more than one year, helped me to understand developmental learning and to be reassured with 'late bloomers'. When I became a parent of two daughters (4 years apart), I experienced the benefits of a multiage environment from a different perspective. Watching my own children go through multiage programs at our elementary school, clearly demonstrated validity of research that has been done about a nongraded philosophy.

My oldest daughter, Kerri - as many first born children - has taken on many leadership roles in school and community situations. She loves being on stage and plans to pursue a performing arts career in another year. At the same time, she has been fairly hesitant in her approach to learning new things such as: riding a bicycle, reading, alpine skiing and driving a car. She was fortunate to spend her first 3 years of schooling in a multiage class, allowing her to develop those foundation skills at her own pace. Unfortunately at that time, there were no multiage programs offered at the upper elementary level at her school. I recall that her grade 5 teacher was very conscientious about preparing the class for Middle School. When Kerri went to Middle School, she made high marks but was very unhappy for 3 long years.

Meredith, being the younger child, was often described by her teacher in early elementary as being a bit reticent in class - avoiding any situation that centered the attention on her. In her third year, she was in the oldest group of a multiage class (5, 6 & 7 year olds). She was given lots of opportunity to develop leadership and peer tutoring skills. I will never forget the time that she offered to come into my class of 5, 6, & 7 year olds to teach a math game to all the children!

The following year, she was placed into a new multiage class of 8&9 year olds with a new teacher to the school. The next year, for various reasons, Meredith's teacher kept her 'grade 3'

half of class on to a single grade 4, adding other 9 year olds to the group. This was a very difficult year for Meredith. At home, she was very temperamental, often erupting in temper spells and very mean to her older sister. At school, her teacher expressed concern about Meredith's tendency to pull away from her friends and physically isolate her desk in the classroom. On a few occasions, she and a group of classmates got into trouble and sent to the office. It shocked her father and I that she would even associate with children that frequently acted out at school. We worried that if she was not confident enough to make responsible choices now, then she most likely would be vulnerable to more serious offers (vandalism, drugs, alcohol, etc.) when she got to Middle School.

Meredith had one year left of elementary school and was invited by her teacher to stay with her in a multiage class of 8, 9 & 10 year olds. As a multiage teacher at the early elementary level at the school, I was delighted to see this non-graded option continue at the upper elementary level. As parents, we were optimistic that this classroom structure would help Meredith develop more self esteem and improve her responsibility and social skills.

It was like magic! We began to notice at home that Meredith was more cooperative and open to talking with us. She argued less with her sister. Her teacher reported that she was more 'social' in class, always in the midst of a group of friends. In the spring, she sang a solo at Music Showcase in front of about 500 students and their families!

Meredith went to Middle School the following year. She had a very positive attitude and joined everything that was going - bands, choir, drama, track and field. Her teachers said she had a great attitude and got along well with her peers. Her marks were at the top of the class and she has continued to excel this year.

Now, of course, I am wishing that Multiage classes were offered through Middle School. I know that there is a lot of resistance to a non-graded philosophy - particularly at the higher grade level. But I am also convinced that if enough teachers, administrators and parents took the time to learn about it, they would be grateful for an alternative structure to 'grades', that is already outdated.

When I talk to groups about "Multiage", I often ask them to jot down three words: academic, social/emotional, and employment. Then I ask them to arrange them in priority order according to what they feel is the most important reason for sending their children to school. When I talk about the research findings, no one can deny that their children would have a better education in multiage classes. When compared to children in single age classes, children in multiage classes are superior in independence, dependability, confidence, responsibility, co-operation, interaction skills, social skills, study habits and attitudes toward school. (Aren't these the traits that current employers are looking for?) Researchers also found that children in multiage classes do as well academically as, if not better, than children learning in single age classes. No matter what reason is placed in number one position, it would appear that multiage can provide a positive learning environment.

As for Meredith, she is now 13. She has the choice of two choir camps this summer on the same site- Junior Choir Camp (ages 8 - 13) and Youth Choir

Camp (13 - 18). Without any hesitation, she chose to return to Junior Choir Camp, and I'm sure "Old Doll" will be going too!

Note: 2004

Old Doll goes to University!

