

# The Multiage Classroom

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*Multiage* classes have intrigued me for over 30 years, and have inspired me to continually learn and adapt new strategies to optimize learning with my students. Sometimes this has meant that I have had to persevere through negative reactions due to misconceptions about multiage pedagogy, as well as taken on work adapting graded curriculum materials to suit my classes consisting of more than one age group. Yet, given the choice of class structures, I would much rather teach a *multiage* class than a single grade.

What is a *multiage class*? Any class comprising of more than one age or grade level is often mistaken as a *multiage* class, when in fact, it may be a *split class* or a *combined class*, put together to solve number bulges in the school population. As long as the teacher is grouping the children according to their age or grade for instruction, assignments, and expectations, the *multiage concept* will be non-existent. Another common mistake is when school staffs intentionally place low performing older students in a class with high performing younger students. This action, based on teaching for *sameness* is not beneficial for students. The social stigma of being placed in such a class clearly identifies children as ‘smart’ or ‘slow’ (depending on their age) making it uncomfortable for children to socialize within the school community and to develop a healthy self esteem. A successful *multiage class* is formed by placing together a **balance** of numbers of students of different age groups with a range of achievement levels. The teacher plans instruction and assessment expecting and celebrating *diversity* within the class.

I don’t use the term *multi-grade* because my philosophy of teaching moves away from *grades*. This archaic graded system that we cling to was introduced to North America by Horace Mann in the mid nineteenth century to produce students that would successfully support a factory model of economy. Even though we have moved into the Information Age, our education system continues to use this traditional framework.

In Nova Scotia, demographics and limited education funding has created many *multi-age* classrooms. Preparing teachers who have grown up in a *graded* system to work with the *multiage concept* requires a paradigm shift in their teaching philosophy. The *multiage concept* is child centered. As a result, the teacher is continually shaping and developing the program to suit the students, instead of trying to ‘fit’ the children to a prescribed set of outcomes. Unless the teacher has done considerable research and thinking about *multiage* pedagogy, he/she unintentionally may make decisions that are contradictory to the philosophy. For example; grouping students by **age** for instruction or giving expectations in assignments according to a particular **age** group, does not take advantage of the *multiage concept*.

I have learned over the years how critical it is to carefully explain the *multiage concept*, because many people have interesting schema in their minds of what goes on in this kind of classroom. Some parents have avoided *multiage* classrooms for their child because they desire more structure, when in fact; well run *multiage* classes are highly structured.

There is shared control between the teacher and students. Students earn their freedom according to their level of self discipline and motivation for self initiated learning. They are accountable to the teacher and to their parents in the student-led conference held each term. Another common belief is that *multiage* classrooms benefit the younger age group, but short change the older students. This couldn't be further from the truth! From my experience as a multiage teacher and mother, it is the oldest age group that benefit the most in a *multiage* class. They have the benefit of continuing their learning with the same teacher, of developing leadership positions within the class community and reflecting on their academic progress as they revisit basic concepts with their younger classmates. The more advanced student is freed from the constraints of a graded curriculum when the teacher is designing a program from a child centered perspective. At the same time, children that would struggle in a traditional graded classroom experience success when given more choice in the level of daily activities. An experienced *multiage* teacher learns to provide a balance of challenge and success for all students.

One of the biggest challenges facing a *multiage* teacher is designing curriculum that is in line with the Department of Education. Under the current department guidelines, it is impossible for a teacher to address the specific social studies, science and health topics for each age group in one year. It makes more sense to integrate topics, choosing fewer for the year, but giving adequate time for each one. The best framework that I have found for integrating topics is *The Project Approach* (Lillian Katz and Sylvia Chard). This strategy allows me to be accountable as I choose the topic (based on provincial outcomes), but gives students opportunity for individual or collaborative inquiry according to their interest.

Teaching strategies that support brain-based learning and emotional intelligence are a perfect fit with the *multiage concept*. I believe that there is no better environment in which children can learn than with an absence of threat, opportunity to make appropriate choices, pursue meaningful content, work collaboratively and have adequate time to complete their work. As a *multiage* teacher, I gravitate toward a democratic classroom to give my students experience in decision making and to take on the responsibility as community members. They learn to assert their voice and listen to other perspectives.

It is critical that *multiage* teachers are well organized and knowledgeable of developmental stages of learning. Instruction and grouping is based on the documentation the teacher has collected about the students' achievement, and because students are learning at different rates, the teacher needs to monitor and document progress continually. Using authentic forms of assessment such as journals, reflections, responses, and conferencing keeps me 'tuned in' to my students' thinking and understanding. At the same time, I encourage the children to become more aware of their learning through their reflections and self evaluations. I know that portfolio assessment requires a huge amount of time, but it is a powerful strategy that contributes to the development of self-initiated learning.

The atmosphere of a *multiage* class has been the element that has kept me doggedly engaged in learning how to develop appropriate teaching strategies. When I witness the cooperative attitude of the students, the peer tutoring that happens naturally and frequently, and the joy expressed by the children, I know that this is a more powerful, respectful way to teach children than sorting them into age groups that places them in a competitive norm-referenced situation. Research that I have found has been favourable about *multiage* classes. When compared to children in single age classes, children in *multiage* classes are superior in study habits, social interaction, self-motivation, cooperation, and attitudes toward school. Academically, children perform just as well or even better than those in single grade classes (Gajadharsingh 1991). I believe that conditions in Nova Scotia schools are 'ripe' for the *multiage concept*. It will take time and effort, but our kids are worth it!

Gajadharsingh, Joel. *CEA Research Study on The Multi-grade Classroom: Myth and Reality A Canadian Study*. Ed. Margaret Gayfer. A Canadian Education Association Report. Toronto, Ontario: 1991.