

# WHY DOES MULTIAGE MAKE SENSE? COMPELLING ARGUMENTS FOR EDUCATIONAL CHANGE

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Once upon a time, according to legend, there was an innkeeper and a cruel robber named Procrustes. Travelers who sought shelter at his home were shocked to find that they would be tied to an iron bedstead for the night; furthermore, if the traveler was shorter than the bed, Procrustes would stretch him or her to fit, and if the traveler was longer than the bed, then limbs were chopped off to make the traveler fit. Thus, Procrustes shaped his guests until they were the same size, albeit dead in some cases (Goodlad & Anderson, 1987).

The structure of education as most of us have known it—formed in grade-level, age-segregated structures—not only is geared to and supportive of mediocrity and averages, it was also designed to serve the convenience of the administrators and the economy instead of the educational needs of children. Grade levels were not an invention designed to suit the needs of children; they were instituted to emulate the factory model and to be cheaper, more efficient, and easier to monitor for administrators.

Isn't it embarrassing that we still group kids in schools like cars in factories?

The industrial model is alive and well in twentieth-century schools. We call those individuals who head up school districts *superintendents* as they were first called in factories. We have kids proceed through the assembly line of school we call *grade levels*. Our quality control checks for standards and uniformity are called promotion (and nonpromotion). We act upon our children along the way (as cars

or refrigerators are assembled uniformly) with grade-level curriculum. We further check their place along the continuum of the finished product with standardized tests (which of course check the teachers, too) and, if we think there are any problems, we give children more tests and try to fix them. In this model, a proportion of failure is expected, and discards are made (schools call it *dropping out*).

What's wrong with this picture?

First of all, we educate children; we don't assemble combustion engines. Children are more complex, and the solutions to educating them are neither easy nor tidy. Second, our goal is to educate *everyone*, without discards. Our free public education system is predicated on the notions of equal opportunity, access, and an education that enables citizens to become literate, informed, and critically aware. Third, we know a great deal more about how to educate children than did our nineteenth-century predecessors (who were doing the best they could for the times), and yet we often fail to implement what we know.

We know there's no logic or reason for grouping students in age-segregated ways as we have been doing for the last 150 years. In the remainder of this article, I hope to present arguments that are both practically and theoretically based in order to illuminate the logic of educating students in mixed-aged groups that we call *multiage*. I'll speak to the features and attributes I have come to learn about educating children in the multiage milieu, including the academic and social advantages, the more affective potentials, and

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the impact on both promotion and long-term educational goals. Unlike the travelers to Procrustes' inn, I will demonstrate in theory how multiage education can serve the spectrum of diverse travelers who journey through our schools with opportunities for all to succeed; education as most of us have known it does not have a great track record for dealing with *everyone*.

Then, in the following articles, my co-authors in this issue will show multiage education in action as it meets the needs of diverse learners. Be prepared to visit these authors and the places they represent and see joy, rigor, and magic in their settings. One caveat, though—these are journeys well along a path which were achieved with years of hard work. No one implemented multiage classrooms without concerns for the curriculum, instruction, and assessment taking place within these family-like structures. Nor are these journeys over. Responsible educators continue to grow, learn, and make programs for children better. These are not simple recipes or quick fixes to improve education.

Let me begin by presenting to you why I believe multiage makes sense.

## Long-Term Goals

The first consideration of why multiage makes sense is our goals. Before we can discuss how to educate children, we must first ask ourselves, as individuals and as communities, what do we want for our children? What are our goals for K–12 education? What outcomes do we desire?

I have asked these questions of many audiences over the years. Responses are

remarkably similar, both in the United States and in other countries. Parents and teachers want their children to become good and happy adults who will earn a productive living, communicate effectively, be good citizens in their community, be critical consumers, make responsible decisions, and go on learning for their entire lives. Goodlad's survey of over 27,000 teachers, students, and parents concluded that people want more than just intellectual development from their schools; they also want attention to social, vocational, and personal emphases. They want school to be a nurturing, caring place (Goodlad, 1984).

How, then, does school contribute to these goals? We would hope that school would, in fact, help meet these goals both in the curriculum and in the learning environment it provides. In considering what goes into the school day, these long-term goals should be kept in mind. We want these things for our children—*all* our children—and all decisions henceforth about schools should help further these goals.

I like Eisner's wise words when he speaks of school goals. He says that a "culture or a school that dulls the senses by neglect or disrespect thwarts the development of human aptitude and undermines the possibilities of the human mind" (1994, p. 29). By aptitude, we aren't just talking about the "basics" here, or the raising of test scores toward some mythical view of excellence; as Howard Gardner points out, the pursuit of basic skills may sometimes be counterproductive, and when we "cover the curriculum" we may be "undermining more crucial educational

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goals” (1991, p. 187). In the schools of today and tomorrow, we are looking for more than basics. We want students to be nurtured toward their own potentials, and we’d like this for all of our children, not just those with economic resources and supportive families. We want students to be respected as well as taught, and leave school understanding their own strengths and the confidence to pursue them in life. All the remarks in this article, as well as those that follow, should be viewed in terms of long-range goals and expectations for the students we teach.

### **Affective Benefits**

Another argument for multiage education concerns some affective parts of schooling. Imagine for a moment that a youngster in an elementary school classroom changes teachers for different subjects (a practice called departmentalization, which focuses on disciplines more than on children). If this student has different teachers for art, music, physical education, and computers (and perhaps speech or special education or ESL), then how many teachers does the child have during one school year? Let’s imagine further that this scene could change each year, starting with a new classroom teacher or homeroom teacher—how many teachers has such a student had by the end of his or her elementary school years?

If this student has anywhere from 6 to 40 teachers during the elementary school years, who will be the one person he or she remembers? Who will be the most responsible for that student? Who will notice when things are going wrong? Who will take action and find out what’s wrong? Why do we play “musical chairs” with teachers? Would anyone think it was a good idea to change *parents* every year? Where’s the continuity? Stability? Longevity? Predictability? Can we pretend all our children have these needs met at home?

One aspect of the multiage environment that I have come to understand is the comfort zone which is created by an environment which is consistent (and hopefully good), predictable, accepting, and stable. The benefits here aren’t just for the students, by the way. Parents and teachers benefit from this as well.

Students benefit from the stable environment when teachers know them well. Their needs are better met. School isn’t a scary place with all sorts of very new things to get used to each year. Starting a new year or semester does not produce anxiety. Some researchers and theorists don’t take these features lightly. Their belief is that children learn and perform better when that work is part of a long-term relationship. Even the human brain, it is believed, works better in situations when the milieu is safe and accepting (Bruner, 1979; Forester & Reinhard, 1989; Hart, 1979; Ridgway & Lawton, 1965; Wakefield, 1979). In a multiage classroom, children report that starting a new year is a lot like going home.

Parents similarly report that vacations between school years or terms are not fraught with anxiety. They have noted the lack of concern they generally experience as new school years approach and children worry about who will be their teacher and who will be in their class. In the case of the multiage environment, these worries occur far less often. Sometimes, there’s no big adjustment or change, and the transition from one term to another is seamless.

Teachers remark on the same feature when they realize a particularly smooth beginning to a new year. Many of the class members already know expectations and routines, and many need little or no assessment in order to determine their strengths. Discipline issues are also eased. One teacher described how, with students she’s taught for a year or more, she need only look at them if they are off-task or

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misbehaving. The relationship that has been built over time with the child and the family pays off in everyday classroom life.

Perhaps one 11-year-old said it best when he was interviewed after four years in a multiage classroom and after one subsequent year in a fourth grade. "We were more like a family," he reported. "We knew each other very well. My new class (fourth grade) is okay. I like it a little, but it is not the same. If you are in a class for a long time, you will not want to leave either."

### Academic and Social Benefits

A few years ago when I co-authored *The Multiage Classroom: A Family of Learners* (Kasten & Clarke, 1993), I thought of these two areas as separate and wrote about them that way. Since then, and much reading later, I have discovered that many psychologists believe that academic or cognitive development and social development are as interrelated as the reading/writing connection. In other words, they are two sides of the same coin. Social development impacts academic development, and academic or cognitive development impacts social development, in a somewhat spiraling fashion.

The implication is that the diverse multiage environment likely is more conducive to learning in several different ways, whether the difference is academic or social in origin. These benefits include interaction, role theory, and modeling; cross-aged tutoring; a decrease in aggressive and competitive behaviors; enhanced social development and self-esteem; birth order in the classroom; and flexibility with promotion issues. Each of these will be briefly discussed.

### Interaction, Role Theory, and Modeling

In a multiage classroom, the interaction among students is especially valuable for a number of reasons. First of all, role the-

ory posits that when someone is placed in a role (such as teacher or tutor), the role is highly influential in shaping his or her behavior. Individuals have the tendency to live up to the expectations that others have of them. Second, theorists such as Vygotsky talk about the benefit of spurring learning and development as a result of problem-solving opportunities that occur between learners of different abilities (the zone of proximal development). Learners benefit from each other through interactions in ways that cannot be accomplished alone (Vygotsky, 1978). Others have added to this idea by emphasizing the value of multiple perspectives and models in learning, even when the models aren't necessarily all good ones. The mere presence of perspectives caused by interaction is a powerful learning catalyst (Bornstein & Bruner, 1989; DiLorenzo & Salter, 1965; Piaget 1928, 1977; Trudge & Rogoff, 1989; Webb, 1977; Wood, 1988). This type of learning is an inherent feature of multiage classrooms, as illustrated in the articles that follow.

### Cross-Aged Tutoring

While role theory suggests that people live up to the expectations others have of them, cross-aged tutoring puts some of this into practice. When students of differing ages and abilities help each other in either incidental or systematic ways, the tutor benefits from the self-esteem and confidence that the new role engenders. There are other equally important advantages. The act of teaching is the most powerful learning tool known. Most teachers have learned this feature on their job, as they discover their own new competence in areas they are required to teach. The same holds true for students of all ages. The act of teaching not only requires synthesis but also prompts one to express these new understandings. The act of translating one's understanding into language is intellectually demanding. One

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must understand the concept, break it down into parts, describe it with words, and gauge the reaction of the recipient. The sum total of all this is deeper, unforgettable understanding (Drake, 1993; Hedin, 1987; Juel, 1991; Leland & Fitzpatrick, 1994; Lougee, Grueneich, & Hartup, 1977; Teale & Labbo, 1990; Valletutti & Dummett, 1992).

In multiage classrooms, cross-aged tutoring happens both incidentally and explicitly. Sometimes it may be contrived when the teacher assigns an experienced student to help a less experienced one, but more typically these interactions are spontaneous and unplanned, and they last only a few minutes. Parents will worry that their children who are more advanced learners will be used or exploited as teachers in a multiage setting. These concepts need to be discussed with parents to alleviate their concerns and help them understand that the act of teaching is a wonderful and powerful gift. Older students or more advanced ones are not “used” or “exploited” in multiage settings. The milieu becomes one where helping others is simply the normal way of operating among all the students. My co-authors demonstrate this feature well.

### **Decrease in Aggressive and Competitive Behaviors**

One more surprising aspect of the multiage or mixed-aged setting is that individuals in these environments have been observed exhibiting fewer aggressive and competitive behaviors; instead, individuals in these mixed-aged settings show more caring, nurturing, and altruistic behaviors. I consider this a serious effect of a multiage environment because it's one that cannot be duplicated in settings where children are segregated by age. This difference may explain why some principals have observed a decrease in discipline referrals from their multiage classes in comparison with their traditionally grouped ones.

Pratt (1986) discusses the historical perspective of human societies (and other primate societies as well) that socialize their young in mixed-aged groups, generally spanning clusters of about three years. In fact, he contends that all hunting and gathering societies that have survived until the twentieth century have socialized their children in this manner. Outside of school, most of society today clusters youth in similar ways. Camps, sports, recreational programs, scouting, dance, martial arts, and many more activities tend to group children in clusters (or if they do not, it is due to a recent change that has attempted to match school structures). Organizing children in clusters of ages is natural as well as being effective and is the most common human grouping plan, except in schools. The benefits have been noted by others as well (Goldman, 1981; Wolfson, 1967). Some teachers have simply stated that they believe children in multiage classes are just kinder to each other.

### **Social Development and Self-Esteem**

This feature of multiage classrooms may result in part from the characteristics discussed above, including the decrease in competitive behaviors, the use of role theory, and modeling. However, even in comparative studies where academic benefits may or may not have shown up, there have been effects in increased self-esteem, confidence, and positive attitudes among students in multiage settings. For districts beginning multiage classes, this would be useful data to collect. Many instruments exist that address self-esteem. If local parents feel similarly to those in Goodlad's extensive 1984 study who want school to attend to issues beyond academics, then this feature becomes an important one and would be well worth documenting through assessments (Buffie, 1963; Connell, 1987; Goldman, 1981; Hammack, 1974; Piaget, 1977; Pratt, 1986; Schrankler, 1976; Wolfson, 1967).

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## Birth Order in the Classroom

Has anyone ever met a student who, by luck of the draw, was younger and less mature than age-mates in his or her kindergarten class? This student may have been chronologically and developmentally younger than other students in the class because of his or her birth date, or just because he or she was a late bloomer. In these cases, even particularly bright children continue to be at the young end of the developmental continuum as they proceed through schooling. They remain less advanced, less mature, and less confident in their abilities than others in their group. The important question in this instance is, if this child proceeds through school always in the same relatively low position as compared to classmates, how does this effect an overall sense of self? Aspirations? Self-esteem?

I have met many such children, but one in particular comes to mind. He was added to a multiage classroom as a kindergarten-aged student when his class was a K-2, and he had turned five only three days before school began. In addition, this youngster had not attended any preschool, had illiterate parents, and was generally developmentally young. This little boy lacked the social skills most five-year-olds possess. In fact, he was the most immature student I had ever met in any kindergarten. In such a situation, no matter how much or how little progress this student makes during his first year of school, when the subsequent school year begins, he will be older and more experienced about many things than next year's new students. He will, after one year in school, have a new opportunity which he'd likely never have if he were in a grade-level classroom. He may become a mentor to someone else, and, in doing so, he will see how much progress he has made instead of always being the youngest.

In real life, birth order affects parenting and families more than we'd like to

believe (Zajonc & Marcus, 1975). We don't control that. But in school, we can manipulate this effect so that everyone can be the younger, middle, and older child at different times, and there are advantages to each. The advantage to being the younger is the help and nurturing from older members of the group. The middle members have opportunities to teach others and still be helped as needed, and to see themselves along the natural continuum of development. The most mature members, however, have the best advantages. One teacher who himself grew up in a multiage situation enjoyed getting help from the older or more advanced learners when he was the little guy. But his favorite time was when he was one of the "big kids." He says he will never forget the feeling he got when he realized he'd first taught something to someone else. Those opportunities to teach and nurture, he believes, helped shape him as a human being and as a future teacher. I have heard stories similar to this from graduates of one-room schoolhouses. Without a doubt, being the eldest is the most prestigious and coveted place to be. Everyone looks forward to getting their turn to be there eventually. In a multiage setting, we can give each learner opportunities to experience the varied benefits of being in different relative positions in classroom birth order. This way, not only do students benefit from each other, but also they will not be adversely affected by being in *any* single position for their entire school career.

## Promotion and Retention

Most educators know the dismal statistics on retaining students in order to repeat a grade level (Goodlad, 1966; Goodlad & Anderson, 1987). Retention simply does not remedy whatever is wrong in most cases. Repeating the same experiences doesn't make anything better; children don't develop in predictable or tidy ways.

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The combination is nasty when decisions have to be made about placement for a child at the end of only one year. This issue, more than any other, caused educators to take a serious look at multiage structures.

In schools where multiage settings exist, either as one alternative or completely, decisions about the promotion of a student can be flexible. Sometimes students begin a primary unit and the expectation is communicated to parents that students graduate from a primary unit to an intermediate one when they are *developmentally* prepared rather than by calendar attendance. Another alternative is that students can be moved in the middle of a term. These decisions are never made lightly, of course (as makes sense). Parents, teachers, children, administrators, and other professionals make these decisions jointly after conferring about the best educational environment for the individual child.

### Summary

I believe that the evidence which suggests that a multiage environment can be superior to one of age-segregated settings is overwhelmingly positive. However, several cautions need to be noted. First of all, the structure alone does not make for a better environment. Considerations of curriculum, teacher quality, sense of community, and compatibility between teacher and student all need to be carefully weighed. My co-authors make these points repeatedly throughout this issue.

Second, the multiage model should not be forced upon teachers, especially not without adequate resources or staff development. Teachers are professionals. Different teachers have different strengths to offer their students. Multiage teaching is one way to serve students better, but teachers may have particular strengths in

curriculum or management that still make them excellent teachers, whether or not they choose to use multiage classrooms.

Third, the change to multiage cannot be made smoothly in any situation without adequate education and communication with parents and the community. Grade leveling, however illogical, is currently a deeply ingrained tradition and cannot be changed easily without systematic reeducation. Most of us can track the years of our childhood or those of others by the grade level membership at the time. Traditions, good or bad, die hard.

The most important consideration then, is, what do we want for our children? What are our goals for K-12 education? In light of these discussions, considerations about implementing multiage classes need to be addressed. The arguments that support multiage education are compelling ones.

The pieces that follow show in practicality what I've argued here theoretically. Each serves as a glimpse into multiage education that demonstrates most of the principles I've discussed. Children with a variety of needs, strengths, abilities, and ways of knowing are thriving in these classrooms. The system doesn't serve only the mediocre, but learners with a difference as well. These examples go far beyond Procrustean standards and assembly-line schooling. They show that multiage makes sense.

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