



SESSION 12 – PROJECT PRESENTATION

Assignment – A position paper about Multi-age Pedagogy for the education community.

Multi-Age: Hype or Just Damn Good Pedagogy?

Introduction

Why is it that one philosophy or educational theory suddenly takes hold at the forefront of contemporary teaching practice then unceremoniously disappears into obscurity? Every crisis—invented or real—triggers a timely school board initiative in response. Emails, newsletters, and the media create a whole new discursive discourse, complete with acronyms and buzzwords, to discuss and manage the latest phenomenon. Many promising innovations are summarily dismissed as dismal failures of short sighted leadership or as a fantastic notion from an academic researcher with little experience staring down a class day after day. Am I being a little too pessimistic? One such trend that comes to mind is the soul sucking activity of standardized testing to sooth public demands in a climate of accountability. Standardized testing will come to pass, too; I guarantee. Now, am I being a little too optimistic? Well, I believe there is a crux of truth in every fad that survives the hype. Perhaps, what is really needed is balance. If I could offer you, a dedicated teacher and consummate professional, a pedagogical framework that allows teaching professionals to choose methods and instructional strategies anchored in solid educational theories, would you at least consider it? Have you heard of a multi-age classroom?

What is Multi-Age Pedagogy?

A multi-age class is a natural heterogeneous cross section of students from the learning community stratified and balanced by age, grade, ability, culture, race, ethnicity, class, and gender all vertically integrated by design to form a stable long-term family of learners. Open and progressive education buttressed by a multi-age class organization capitalizes on sound educational theories. Here in the milieu of multi-age, elements of constructivism and humanism paradigms intersect. Brain-based learning, experiential learning, communities of practice, discovery learning, and social development theories are operationalized. Multi-age pedagogy stands on the shoulders

of Piaget, Dewey, Bruner, Vygotsky, Wenger, Steiner, and Montessori. Multi-age practices are a foundation from which we can hang all the best didactic practices under one umbrella but with an added spark of synergy. Multi-age pedagogy offers the opportunity to establish a community of learners, and then draw upon a firm social network to achieve a level of personal understanding beyond any single learner in isolation or passively receiving information. For those educators that dare pick up the gauntlet, the multi-age classroom becomes an extraordinary site of academic and personal development.

Multi-age presumes children's innate curiosity and social disposition that propels them to learn and share with each other. Dynamic and flexible student groups are formed by interests, ability, achievements, friendships, and at random to complete a meaningful task. Activities are organized by projects, themes, concepts, and topics. Each member contributes to their group and individual work at their developmentally appropriate level, often working at their own pace, with the goal of continuous improvement and academic growth for each and every student. Student groups are easily disbanded and quickly reconstituted for the next learning venture. Notice the absence of 'age' or 'grade'. In fact, every effort should be made to remove grade-level and age related language from the multi-age classroom lexicon. 'Challenge', 'choice', and 'explore' become the mantra of a multi-age class.

Just to be clear, when I say 'multi-age', I am not simply referring to a resurrected relic of the one-room schoolhouse polished anew. I am not talking about two grades of students jammed into one split-class rationalized under the guise of managerial convenience (e.g. segregate students with challenging behaviours) and administrative efficiencies (e.g. student enrolment numbers) in times of fiscal restraint. Multi-age is not another word for split class, combined class, blended grades, mixed grades, composite class, or multi-level class. Multi-age is an ideology as much as it is a structure. Multi-age pedagogy and instructional design must be your free choice.

Multi-Age Benefits

Everyone has heard of child-centred education, differentiated instruction, and authentic assessment. Every teacher recognizes the power of small groups with shared abilities and interests to sustain self-initiated learning, teaching children at a developmentally appropriate level, and the argument for documenting the solution to real life issues and problems for evaluation. We all do our utmost to blend them into our instruction. I bet you have already taken the first steps toward a multi-age instructional methodology. However, multi-age offers potentially rich social and emotional benefits for students: the natural cross-age tutoring opportunities; the wider social experience; the transition of class roles from a novice to a mentor and a follower to a leader; increased reflection, cooperation, and collaboration; decreased anxiety and competition; and finally realize the benefits of a lasting relationship between teacher and students.

Of course, multi-age benefits are not automatic. The onus is on the teacher to devise and sustain a climate for investigation and academic inquiry. Teach students the skills need to construct their question, research, and judge the qualities of their work. Educators must model the process, teach students the rules for a classroom conducive to learning, help students with conflict resolution, and teach students how to critique the work of others with tact and decorum.

A classroom teacher devoid of any decision-making and meaning-making is a person disguised as a machine programmed to deliver a calcified curriculum. Multi-age practice stimulates a creative work environment. Teachers are empowered to fit the curriculum to the class, right down to each individual student. The teaching profession is stressful, especially if stripped of any authority and self-determination. Teaching in a multi-age class is not without stress, but at least the stress is self-imposed. Teachers measure their performance against their own expectations of themselves to reach each student and affect student learning. The benefits of a multi-age structure extend beyond the domain of students, but to teachers' job satisfaction as well.

Multi-Age Criticisms

Multi-age pedagogy is not without criticism. Some criticisms are borne out of ignorance and others out of the pragmatic realities on modern teaching and learning in our public schools. Let's take a moment to consider a few.

One common question posed, "*How do you plan on teaching two or three curriculums, one for each grade?*" The answer is, "Don't even try." Comb through the provincial curriculum for each grade-level by subject and find common themes and ignore duplicate learning outcomes. Develop projects that satisfy the curriculum requirement and begin to integrate cross curricular connections. Project-based learning takes more time than a 'stand and deliver' lecture so a project which satisfies more general and key learning outcomes is often preferable. Look for quality, not quantity. Develop a skeletal plan; students will help you generate ideas and incorporate the ideas to customize the project until it becomes their project. Guide students through the process from inception to final assessment.

How do you teach in the chaos of multi-age classrooms? To the casual observer, a multi-age classroom may seem disorganized. The strict order of a traditional classroom, in form and function, is diminished. Once children learn the rules and expectations, they will adapt to a multi-age environment. Have a faith in their abilities and their impetus for self-determination. New students to the class will emulate students returning for another year. A low murmur of student voices actively engaged in their work is better than the clear commanding voice of a teacher talking at students with brief interruptions of dead silence. Make no mistake, the day is planned and directed by the teacher, but large blocks of time are set aside for individual research, pairing and sharing, peer tutoring, and yes, even whole group instruction. Student and teacher develop a plan that aligns with the curriculum, challenges the student, and connect students with other students.

With all the group work and projects, some students can fly under the RADAR, have their classmates do all the work, and never have to take any responsibility for their performance. Aside from the fact that students are quite capable of coasting and plagiarizing the work of others in a teacher-led classroom, authentic assessment techniques reduce the likelihood. Journals, responses, reflections, performances, self-evaluations, rubrics, demonstrations, interviews, and conferences to name a few are all at the disposal of teachers and students to demonstrate achievement and mastery of learning outcomes in a multi-age class. Students negotiate learning contracts with the teacher. High expectations, high achievement, and challenge at the developmentally appropriate level are embedded into every project. Since students determine their projects by strengths, talents, and interests; they have a vested interest in doing their best. They are only competing with themselves, so why cheat? Activities can only be solved through focussed attention to the problem. Generic rubrics designed ahead of time and rubrics customized with the student or group of students input clearly define the scope and the expected quality of their work. Group work may only be one part of their learning contract. With students busily working on their own projects, teachers have time to visit students, talk to students about their progress, encourage students, and help students with any areas of difficulty. Students are asked to routinely reflect on their learning and share their thoughts with their teacher and peers. Parents may also see their learning contracts to monitor their child's progress. It's difficult to imagine a student going unnoticed.

Implementation

The ethos of education is firmly endowed into the traditional classroom. There are formidable constraints that limit 'legitimate' forms of teaching to white-collar clerical work. From the classroom teacher's perspective, there is nothing convenient about multi-age design. I make no promises here. For those educators brave enough to challenge the *status quo* and willing to engage and refine their practice, multi-age pedagogy is an opportunity to construct their brand of pedagogy—a pedagogy that deviates from preordained methods and bowling alley curriculums.

Step 1: Read and learn everything you can on multi-age instructional design. Find examples of successful multi-age classrooms in action from both private and public schools in your province. Seek out the advice of the experts in multi-age pedagogy. The know-how exists right in your backyard. In the true spirit of professional learning communities, teachers are willing to share their stories and experience to help you and your students succeed.

Step 2: Convince your administration that multi-age is not only workable, but desirable. Present your plan to the rest of the faculty. You will need support.

Step 3: Here comes the hard part. Present your ideas to parents and the community in the early stages. Parents and teachers break out in hives at the first mention of split classes and combined grades. Everyone is a self-appointed authority when it comes to public school education. It will be up to you to cut through the confusion and sort the myths from reality.

Step 4: Make it happen. Jump in with both feet with your eyes wide open. If you prefer, there are other ways of implementing a multi-age class organization, in content and ideology, in phases. For example, team teach with a like-minded teacher in another grade. Find themes shared by the established provincial curriculum for each grade and create group projects that blur the invisible line between grades. Try looping. Stay with your class for two or three years. You will gain valuable experience with the curriculum and students and parents will begin to see the benefits of a perennial relationship among teacher and students for themselves. When you are ready to challenge the illusion of a traditional graded classroom, established by Horace Mann over 150 years ago, you will have allies.

Step 5: Take the time to reflect on the learning processes within your classroom. Keeping a journal throughout the year might not be a bad idea. Not only look for what worked and what didn't work but also consider the wider political, social, and economic climate of the classroom, school, and community. Write about multi-age instructional design and publish in school newsletters and educational journals. Allow your thoughts and experiences to coalesce in the process of theory-building and engage in a conversation with other educators. Graciously, accept the feedback with an open mind and grow from the experience.

A cycle of planning, organizing, conducting, and evaluating is essential. This rudimentary model is certainly not a by-the-numbers, teacher proof implementation plan. To suggest one would trivialize the endeavour and spit in the eye of teachers' professionalism.

Conclusion

Is a multi-age, non-graded structure the next trend? I hope that I've given you pause to consider multi-age pedagogy and instructional design as a shift from the traditional graded classes that we've grown so accustomed. If I haven't, I've missed my mark. Without going too Freirean on you, multi-age ideology is a reformist pedagogical vision *of, for, and with* possibility. Multi-age pedagogy is designed to empower students and teachers through a confluence of theory and practice. In other words, multi-age is an alternate mode for doing school differently. Rhetoric aside, multi-age ideology, structures, and practice hold promise to balance a mandated provincial curriculum and the learning needs and wants of the next generation. Balance is not everything in moderation. Use what works for your students and what works for you. Discard what doesn't. Play to each others' strengths. Innovate and educate.