

Why Not Multiage?

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. . . I remember the exact moment that I decided to be a teacher. I was in Grade 5, a one room school in rural Prince Edward Island. As a child I remember watching my teacher in awe. She was a lady who seemed to know everything, was respected in the community, and had power and control over our lives. We always got along with our classmates of various ages; they were our neighbors and friends. We had no choice but to get along. The good ole days? Not quite. This was after all, the age of few novels and stories except for the classic, “See Dick . . . see Jane Run” series. Textbooks were rare, but we did many interesting projects and activities. We had many outdoor learning activities. Everyone helped those sitting close to them. We were family and acted accordingly. The teacher was a second parent to us. We were happy and willing to learn. We felt challenged. I wanted to be a teacher! Someone who truly touched the lives and souls of every child . . . Now many years later, I have become the teacher. Considered creative and popular among students and parents, I work hard to engage my students. But despite my best efforts, the numerous resources at my disposal, the huge amount of money spent on education, and the age of technology at my fingertips, I find many students disinterested in learning. They seldom want to learn beyond what is rote memory. They always ask when presented with a challenge, “Is this for marks?”. So what happened? Why are students not learning for the joy of learning itself?

Perhaps the answer is the education system itself. As a Nation, we have spent years fitting groups of children to overcrowded outcomes, standardized testing, and endless curriculum activities. We have created a generation of disinterested citizens who may be a “jack of all trades, but a master of nothing.” We need to drastically change how we teach and educate the youth of tomorrow. We need to stand with parents and demand that children be taught according to their individual interests, abilities, and expectations. It is time that we consider multiage learning. Why Multiage you ask? Why not Multiage?

A Multiage classroom is a learning approach that allows children of different academic levels and ages to work together with the same teacher(s) for several years. One of the greatest strengths of multiage learning over traditional methods is the *available of time*. Student needs, interests, and challenges are fostered in a classroom atmosphere of consistency and trust that are not dictated by the traditional classroom which is ruled by the calendar year. For example, you may have a class of 7 to 9 year old children in one class for several years. Multiage teaching allows students the *long-term potential of becoming a family unit* where trust, fewer discipline problems, and leadership among stronger students who assume tutoring roles, often occurs. Teachers and students are given more time together to know their strengths and to

improve their social and academic difficulties. Every student learns at their own pace while covering the curriculum. They are not all forced to be at the same place at the same time as their peers. After all, why do we keep insisting that every child of the same age, learn the same skill at the same time? This is not how adults learn. It is *not natural* to expect the same results with every child. Education is about children . . . their *individual hopes, needs, abilities, and potential*. Yet, we continue to be more concerned with content and meeting curriculum outcomes within a specific time frame. Society needs to remember that we are educating children to become informed, socially active, and caring citizens . . . *we are not mass producing a product for future employment*.

Multiage learning not only provides the time needed to allow students and teachers to engage in higher learning activities, but it also develops a child's long term attending skills. Although engaging activities occur in the traditional setting, these are usually the exception to the rule. In a multiage classroom, children are given the opportunity and have the desire to engage in such learning *on a daily basis*. Single grade students are rarely given the chance to explore any activity for any period of time, let alone have the time to celebrate and share their accomplishments with others outside the classroom. As Raymond Hartjen in his book Empowering the Child argues, there is a strong need for long-term attending skills in a child's life. To succeed in any activity, we need people to be able to focus their attention on a task and think "outside the box" from time to time. Traditional school settings however, seldom accomplish this. It often takes more than a year to develop such skills and they cannot be taught in isolation. Long term attending skills can only occur if students have the opportunity to engage in activities that are challenging, suited to the individual needs and abilities of each child, and have meaning to the student's life. Multiage learning gives children and teachers the time they need.

It is important to realize that one of the cornerstones of multiage learning is that classrooms are not curriculum driven, but rather child-centered. Fewer, key outcomes are identified in core areas. Using projects and open-ended activities, students take responsibility and control for their own learning. They are encouraged to work in groups or in isolation when they wish to. Students, parents and facilitators work together to create for each child, their own personal growth plan. The students have several portfolios that contain their progression in areas of writing and math. Students are not graded or tested. They become *advocates for their own learning* by taking responsibility and having an active role in their own success.

Although research findings concerning multiage are often inconsistent, there is some improvement in Math and Language Arts for multiage students. As Susan Kinsey in her article "Multiage Grouping and Academic Achievement" points out, the real difference between multiage and traditional classrooms are in the affective area of learning. Multiage students have a marked improvement in their socio-emotional growth, self-esteem, improved behavior, and leadership skills. Traditional competition and frustration are often replaced by co-operation, respect for other people's

differences, and improved leadership skills in a multiage classroom . . . all of which are important skills in becoming successful members of a global society. Less time is needed each year learning to accept each other and knowing what problems need to be addressed. Weaker students have the benefit of receiving help from their peers, being more comfortable in asking for help, and self-esteem improves as they model the older students. This does not surprise me. When students are allowed to make decisions in their own learning, encouraged to work with other children for years, and not labeled or assessed to someone else's expectations, then true meaningful learning will take place. No one needs to be reminded of their mistakes or that they cannot do the work (and not given the time to learn it before a new concept is taught). A healthy self-esteem must not be underestimated. No adult functions effectively at his/her greatest potential without having a healthy self-esteem. A belief in oneself has lifelong consequences in how that person will solve problems and interact with others in society. By offering an enriched curriculum, effective teachers, engaging and challenging activities, social interaction, and meaningful work on a daily basis, multiage learning provides what a traditional classroom cannot . . . the time and freedom for students to value learning, for the joy of learning itself. *As a teacher or parent, what more could one hope for?*

References:

- Hartjen, Raymond. *Empowering the Child: Nurturing the Hungry Mind. Maryland: Alternative Education Press, Ltd. (1994).*
- Kinsey, Susan. "Multiage Grouping and Academic Achievement," in *Eric Digest* (January, 2001): pp1-2.