

Multiage Journey

Multiage, like other educational terms, conjures up different thoughts and experiences. It is a term that I have explored formally and informally during my short 6-year life as a teacher. Many research and professional articles present educational concepts as prescriptions that when applied in particular ways in specific contexts will yield predictable outcomes. For me, the term Multiage is not a prescription; rather it has been the ongoing development of a personal educational philosophy. To clarify what Multiage classroom means to me, I employ the following "elevator definition". A multiage classroom is a consistent environment that provides appropriate social and academic support for all differing abilities regardless of age.

After writing this, I realize that my journey began during my first year out teaching. Although my memories of that year vague, I recall being overwhelmed by the diverse academic, social, physical and emotional needs of my class. I recollect working endless hours and changing things day after day, night after night, and week after week. I implemented many different instructional strategies during that year. The fundamental requirement for me was to balance curricular requirements and individualized needs.

During this first year, I had several days to observe in other New Brunswick and Nova Scotia classrooms. While I viewed diverse educational approaches, I saw one in particular that intrigued me. Coincidentally, I ended up teaching at the same school the next year. Over the next two years I struggled to find a good set up and balance for my classroom. I read voraciously, started my Masters, and continued to observe in classrooms. In the end I went back to take a closer look at that classroom that first intrigued me. There I discovered a balance of whole group learning with individualized instruction. The physical setup of the classroom was less than traditional. Yet, everything had its place. Children had personal choice and were working individually at an appropriate level. Curriculum was organized, some in cross-curricular ways and others in sequential logical ways where the children could work at their own pace. On the surface, the classroom seems a bit chaotic. However after spending five minutes talking to one child, I recognized that the curriculum was authentic and designed to meet individual needs. Children's progress was intimately tracked and personal choice was available within a set of parameters. I spent a great deal of time in these classrooms and the next year began to work with two other teachers. We were able to plan together and our relationships were deeply rooted our desire to create a learning environment that met individual needs.

Our discussions challenged us to think, read and design new lessons, as well as educational approaches.

During this year, I discovered a balance that worked; I found my "stride". Through spending time reading, thinking, and most importantly creating the time to talk and observe, I felt successful in my teaching. For me, success was seeing how effectively I could meet each student's needs. It gave me a starting point in which I could grow from and keep striving.

When I walk into my classroom, I feel as if it is my second home. The classroom is designed to be student-friendly, and to encourage student ownership. Let me take you on a short tour.

Immediately to the left and right of the doorway are **organizational areas** - a basket to collect "back and forth" bags, lunch money, recycling, compost, garbage, brooms and spray bottles to clean up. There is also an area where we keep our indoor shoes. As you turn to the left, there is our **business area**. This is the area where the children keep all their books, mailboxes, pencils, erasers, any supply that they may need. All the supplies are communal. Included in this area is a folder where students track certain

parts of their Language and Math progress. The children place all their finished work in the "in box" where it waits to be looked at and recorded.

This **business section** of the classroom is also shared with the **practical life section**. The **practical life section** houses activities that help develop fine motor control as well as pursuits that assist with the improvement of concentration skills. Students transfer and sort objects, pour materials, paint, and do up buttons and snaps. These activities change from time to time reflecting students' needs and interests.

Across from the **practical life**, you will find the **Language Arts section**; it is divided into two areas; the library and actual language lessons. The library is sorted by fiction and nonfiction. In the fiction section, books are sorted by author and subject while in the nonfiction, books are organized by subject and author. An area rug, a "couch" that I made out of a built in shelf, a very interesting hanging ceramic lamp retrieved from a local yard sale, and four goldfish create a homey, comfortable reading center.

On the other side of the nonfiction shelf, are the Language lessons. You will find all the elements of a balanced literacy program; only, they may appear a

little different at first glance. In some activities, children work through sequential lessons that present the material using a step-by-step approach. One such lesson deals with high frequency words. The children have a master sheet where all the high frequency words they do not know are highlighted. They complete a series of activities with the words and then schedule a conference with the teacher. If the children know the word, it is moved to their known words. If the child does not know the word, they carry it over until they do. Students understand that mistakes are part of the learning process. Next to the Language lessons, there is a listening center and computer.

In addition we have the **Math section** which is divided by topic, much like you might divide your yearly topics into units; such as, a geometry section, a numeracy section, addition and subtraction etc. The lessons all have a specific place. Created mostly of wood, they are durable and organized in ways that are aesthetically pleasing. Many of the manipulatives are tactilely satisfying to touch and interesting in their variety. There are not twenty-five copies of each because not all the children use them at the same time.

Next to the Math section, there is the **general studies section**, which includes the Social Studies, Science, and Health section. Organized much like the Math section, lessons are accessible to the children all year round. Every year, I choose sections that we developed in more depth later in the year. Last year, I highlighted the Science section and created a series of lessons that dealt with the five senses. This year my focus will be on my Social Studies section. I intend on applying for a grant to purchase maps, which are quite expensive, durable and designed to last.

These learning centers frame the perimeter of the room, allowing for a free space in the middle of the room. Several shelves are used to create barriers to divide the room. Different sized tables scattered around the room, seat one, two and four children. Children do not have assigned desks rather they have nametags that travel with them. If the children wish to work on the floor, there are mats that they can use. If a break time comes and they are in the middle of a lesson, they can leave it out, putting their nametag on it indicating they are using that lesson and space. A circle in the middle of the room creates a space for whole group instruction.

Classroom routines are designed to be user friendly and time efficient. A bathroom system allows students to make personal decisions. However, just like everything in the classroom, there are expectations, codes of conduct. If they are not met, it is addressed individually or in a group circle time.

Some of the classroom design and instructional ideas have been gleaned from the fine educators who opened their classrooms to me and allowed me to enter into their journeys. For this, I will be eternally grateful.

In closing, I believe the most important aspect of a multiage journey is to make the time to think, read, talk and observe. In addition, I need to do this within a learning community of like-minded colleagues who are committed to challenging and encouraging each other in this exciting educational journey.