

NEW TREND: TEACHING AND LEARNING IN A MULTI AGE CLASS ROOM

Dr.(Mrs.) S.Samuel
NSS College of Education

Multi-age classrooms or **composite classes** are classrooms with students from more than one grade level. They are created because of a pedagogical choice of a school or school district. They are different from split classes which are formed when there are too many students for one class - but not enough to form two classes of the same grade level. Composite classes are more common in smaller schools; an extreme form is the school. Studies of the performance of students in composite classes shows their academic performance is not substantially different from those in single-grade classrooms; instead, outcomes tend to be a function of the teacher's performance. For a given number of students, composite classes allow greater administrative flexibility in allocating students to classes. This allows gender balancing, matching of student needs to teaching expertise, and balancing class sizes. By allocating children to classes according to specific learning needs, it is possible to arrange classes with narrower ranges of abilities. Composite classes often meet resistance, with parents often believing that their child is disadvantaged by being in one. This perception is often regardless of whether their child would be in the younger or older cohort.¹⁶ Advocates of multi-age classrooms point to the lack of age stratification in workplaces, families or other social environments as a reason to create a similar environment in the classroom. A multiage classroom is not simply a group of different aged students placed in the same classroom. Instead it is a well organized and thoroughly thought out program designed to take advantage of the natural diversity created.

The Multiage Concept Explained

A multiage classroom is not simply a group of different aged students placed in the same classroom. Instead it is a well organized and thoroughly thought out program designed to take advantage of the natural diversity created. It helps teachers to learn and adapt new strategies to optimize learning with students. Sometimes there are negative reactions due to misconceptions about multiage pedagogy, or graded curriculum materials to suit classes consisting of more than one age group.

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 staff 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. Even though we have moved into the Information Age, our education system continues to use the traditional framework. 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. 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. The truth is that it is the oldest age group that benefits 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 it makes more sense to integrate topics, choosing fewer for the year, but giving adequate time for each one.

The best method

The best method for multi age teaching is The Project Approach. This method allows students to be accountable, 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. 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. A multiage teacher gives 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, Multi-age classrooms, the teacher needs to monitor and document progress continually. Using authentic forms of assessment such as journals, reflections, responses, and conferencing helps keeps 'tuned in' to students' thinking and understanding. The cooperative attitude of the students, the peer tutoring that happens naturally and frequently, and the joy expressed by the children, is a more powerful, respectful way to teach children than sorting them into age groups that places them in a competitive norm-referenced situation. Researches show that multi age class rooms are successful and more scope to learn and develop for students. 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).

Teaching

Teaching a group of mixed age students can be challenging. But there are many ways one can work with this situation and have a fun and successful time for all of the students involved. Communicate clearly with parents. Let parents know what the goals for the class are and what assistance a teacher need from them. With mixed age classes, students may be working with different materials, such as textbooks or worksheets. If that's the case, the teacher won't have as much time to spend helping students as normally would, so one need the parents to help out. Teacher should be specific in letting parents know what teacher would like them to do outside of class time.

Procedure

Teacher should allow the older students to lead in the class room. If the lessons are created around activities that appeal more towards the younger learners, there is a good chance the older learners will start to tune out, even if they are helping out a lot. If a teacher plans lessons with the older students in mind, some of the activities will be too difficult for the others, but the younger children generally look up to their older friends/siblings. They watch what they do and try to emulate them. This also gives the older learners a chance to help the younger learners, and that's a great opportunity for the older learners to reinforce what they are learning. Teacher should give everyone a chance to participate. When teacher does activities more appropriate for the younger learners, the older kids can act as the teachers or as teacher's helpers. This will give them the chance to practice their skills in another way.

Use of stories and songs

Both picture books and songs are great for reaching kids of a variety of ages. Because of the illustrations, all the students should be able to follow along with a picture book. The great thing about books is that they speak to each of us in different ways depending on where we are in our lives. A teacher can interact with each of the students by asking them questions that are appropriate for their level. If students who are readers, teacher can help them to read.

By using songs that are simple enough for very young, emerging speakers, but fun enough for older learners of all levels, all of the students can join in.

The importance of models

There may be times when a teacher can do an activity that the older learners "get" or can do but the younger learners can't. It may be disappointing that everyone couldn't participate in the activity. But it helps the younger learners to see their older friends/siblings doing something they can't yet do. It gives them someone to look up to, and something to aspire to.

Use of flexible teaching materials

Think of ways one can make simple vocabulary building activities for the younger learners into reading activities for the older learners. For example, if teacher use flashcards to introduce or review vocabulary in class, make

them so that they have both the picture and the word on the card. When teacher attempt to elicit the word from an older learner, just reveal the word part of the card first. Play games like Concentration in teams with one older kid and one younger kid paired together. Have the students match picture cards to word cards. The older student can help read the word cards while the younger student can name the picture cards.

Make Crafts

Adding a craft to lesson, even if it's just once every few classes, can really help. Make something simple, such as a Mother's Day card with construction paper, and grade it up for the older learners by having them write a message on it. Everyone gets to learn by following directions from the teacher and the older learners can help the younger ones. Even if the craft very, very simple, each student will be able to make something that suits their level of maturity.

Social benefits of multi age classrooms:

- Older children in a composite class get more leadership opportunities and frequently build self-esteem as a sort or role model to the younger class mates. Younger children aspire to do work like the older children in the class.
- The ability for a child to be educated by the one teacher for two years, creating a stronger relationship
- Because literacy and numeracy is taught in ability groups, teachers need heightened awareness of individual student's capabilities - they must think of children as individuals.
- The techniques of classroom teaching and of individual teaching can be still applied.
- Learning by teaching occurs when students at different stages of learning can help each other with their work; children resolve differences in understanding of material.
- Composite classes provide a range of levels of work, so the needs of both talented children and slower learners can be catered for, while providing a supportive environment for both.

It is more holistic, child-responsive curriculum practices that consider the understandings, capabilities and dispositions that children need for future work.

Working in diverse environments help children multi-skilled, literate, cooperative, creative, adaptable, independent and resourceful.

- **Children and teachers usually have the opportunity to work together for more than one year, which enhances continuity of learning and the forming of positive relationships with teachers and children, and between children.**
- Because of the mixed age group, the younger children benefit from the positive models of older children, often aspiring to their levels of capability.
- Older children rise to the expectations of the younger children and teacher, being very responsible and having opportunities to lend and use their expertise.
- Children, teachers, parents and other partners acknowledge and engage with each other's diverse knowledge through child initiated and teacher-initiated learning experiences.
- Children can talk about, represent, reflect on, and begin to evaluate aspects of their learning with others.
- They work on activities independently and in a range of groupings, e.g. pairs, small groups, whole group - build co-operative learning skills,
- Students share, turn-taking, listening, mentoring, negotiating, considering alternative points of view, mediating and resolving conflict in social situations -
- Work with others at times who have similar or different capabilities, needs and interests to deepen and extend understandings and make links between prior and new experiences.
- Actively investigate topics of personal interest, using inquiry-based learning to aid meaning-making about aspects of local and global communities.

The Challenge ahead-

One of the biggest challenges facing a multiage teacher is designing curriculum. Under the current department guidelines, it is impossible for a teacher to address the specific social studies, Science and Math 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 for integrating topics is The Project Approach. This strategy allows the teacher to be accountable, 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. 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, it gravitates toward a democratic classroom to give 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.

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