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The Multiage Classroom: A Collection

A school should not be a preparation for life. A school should be life.—Elbert Hubbard

The multiage, nongraded, continuous progress classroom resembles the family. It contains groupings of children of various ages working and playing together; clusters of youngsters learning from one another, as well as from their own endeavors; and little people fighting, arguing, displaying impatience and frustrations as they learn to tolerate the diversity of others. It is a multitude of abilities, talents, and styles as well as a spectrum of ages. It is the developmentally appropriate, mixed-age classroom, reminiscent of that “one-room schoolhouse” of years gone by.

As with other educational “innovations,” the idea swings like a pendulum does. Now, it’s in. Now, it’s out. Over the years, the concept has taken on a number of names: one-room schoolhouse, multiaged, split classroom, nongraded, mixed-ages, developmentally appropriate, and continuous progress classroom.

Each time this concept is revisited, it is because it seems so child-compatible, so natural, and so appropriate. Now, once again, the call for holistic models of schooling dictates a thorough investigation of more natural groupings of the students themselves. Although multiage, nongraded, continuous progress classrooms are not new ideas, the implementation of these models carries with it several ramifications. To fully explore the implications of the mixed-age classroom, this collection of articles represents a review of the available literature that is readily accessible and easy to evaluate.

Gathered under one cover, the articles are grouped into manageable pieces of information that focus on specific issues and concerns associated with the concept of mixed-age groupings of students. Leading the collection is a section entitled, “Questions and Answers” that addresses the overriding concerns and frequently asked questions about multiage classrooms. Immediately following this section is a further look at concerns, but the selections are filtered through a “Pros and Cons” approach as readers experience the teeter-totter effect of evaluating the benefits and drawbacks of an idea.

The third section brings together a number of pieces that delineate the procedures and practices associated with the multiage, nongraded, continuous progress classrooms. The section entitled “In Practice” exposes the principles and practices that undergird the concept.

The next two sections of the collection profile primary classrooms and offer examples at the intermediate levels as well. Both present actual illustrations of multiage, nongraded, developmentally appropriate classroom to help readers better visualize these learning environments.

Finally, a cluster of assessment articles are included to bring the exploration of the mixed-age classroom full circle—from the initial questions and pros and cons, to principles and practices in actual classrooms, and then to the final question of evaluation and accountability.

Although the book may suggest a bias toward multiage, nongraded, continuous progress classrooms, the specific articles in the collection are selected to represent an unbiased exploration of the issues. This assortment of ideas may, indeed, answer your most pressing questions and allow you to move ahead with an initiation plan, or it may merely act to open a floodgate of further issues to investigate. In either case, it is our hope that the collection is a stepping stone on the path to schools that are more learner-centered, schools that enable all students to develop and grow to their fullest.