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Introduction

The one-room schoolhouse dominated the education institution for centuries. Students from a variety of areas travelled great distances to learn reading, writing, and arithmetic in a crowded school room. These children, all of varying ages, worked together to become literate, responsible members of society. Many attained greatness from the deeds they accomplished. The one-room schoolhouse produced the leaders of our country, many foreign diplomats, and even Nobel Prize winners.

It was not until the Industrial Revolution that students became separated by age into year levels. Unfortunately, this created many problems for the students. Rather than considering the specific needs and interests of each child, the shift to grouping attempted to address every child's needs with the same curriculum and instruction. In addition to stripping children of their uniqueness, these year levels hampered the development of self-esteem and co-operation skills.

Multi-age education, is most similar to the one-room schoolhouse approach. The multi-age practice has become an actual philosophy of teaching based on developmentally appropriate ideals, where the teacher creates an environment for students of multiple ages to learn and prosper. The students, working independently and collectively to learn topics of relevance and interest, have an increased self-esteem and a more positive attitude toward school. In fact, teachers implementing such programs are ecstatic over the results. Classrooms are becoming communities of learners, and students are learning at a rapid pace. So, how does a multi-age classroom start? What is the teacher's role? What does the curriculum look like? How is assessment handled?

This book attempts to answer these questions and many more. It provides an in-depth look at the rationale of multi-age education and the current research on multi-age programs. It describes the steps for implementing a multi-age program and includes specific examples for setting up the room, daily planning, determining the curriculum, grouping for instruction, using learning centres, soliciting parent help, and assessing student progress. The book also presents samples of student work, cooperative learning lessons, and appropriate themes of study. It identifies misconceptions about multi-age programs, discusses common problems to avoid, and celebrates the joys of successful programs. The journey to multi-age education is truly a remarkable experience. Enjoy!

Profile of Multi-Age Education

History

In 1959, John Goodlad and Robert Anderson published *The Nongraded Primary School* in which they described the rationale and advantages of a multi-age program. They emphasised the need for holistic teaching, flexible groupings, and an environment where children could progress at their own pace and in varied ways. In 1960, John Goodlad became the Director of University Primary School, a research school at the University of California, Los Angeles. It was at University Primary School that Goodlad implemented the multi-age model and gained national attention.

Nearly twenty years later, interest in the approach mounted and Goodlad and Anderson's book was revised. With the success of the University Primary School program, the authors claimed, "There is simply no research that says a graded structure is desirable" (p. xxviii). Today, hundreds of teachers are teaching in multi-age classrooms, and more are showing interest by the minute. So, just what is multi-age education?

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Definition

The term “multi-age,” in its most simplistic form, refers to a classroom with students of various ages. However, under this definition, almost any classroom qualifies as a multi-age classroom. After all, a traditional year one classroom has students with birth dates ranging over a twelve-month period, older students who have been retained, and younger students who have received early promotion. Hence, the term multi-age has become much more complex. It has developed into an actual philosophy of teaching, based upon developmentally appropriate ideals, where students of various ages, interests, and abilities work and learn together in a mutual relationship.

The term multi-age has become synonymous with other terms, as well. Continuous progress, mixed-age, nongraded, and multiyear have become interchangeable and define the practice of teaching students of multiple ages and abilities without year level constraints and requirements.

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The multi-age (continuous progress, mixed-age, nongraded, or multigrade) approach is most similar to the old schoolhouse philosophy, where students of all ages and abilities worked in the same room and with the same teacher. This schoolhouse approach was the norm until the nineteenth century. Students ages five to eighteen studied as a community of learners in one school room with one teacher.

It was not until the Industrial Revolution that teachers and administrators began dividing children into groups of similar ages, or year levels (Miller, 1991). Unfortunately, this decision was based on the needs of the country and teachers, not the needs of children. It was meant to make the job of the teacher easier by allowing for whole-class instruction. However, almost all teachers will agree that regardless of which students are placed in a class, individual needs are just not the same. All students learn differently and at varying rates. Some students progress faster than others; some progress more slowly. The multi-age philosophy, reminiscent of the old schoolhouse approach, respects these individual needs and characteristics.

Composite Classes

The multi-age approach is most commonly mistaken as a composite class. Unfortunately, a majority of parents and teachers make the assumption that a multi-age setting is just a classroom where multiple year levels meet simultaneously yet receive instruction in a segregated manner. This could not be farther from the truth. If multi-age teachers ran their classrooms like composite classes, providing three to four separate agendas (one for each age group), there would be little benefit. Students might profit socially, but the teacher would be performing under the as-