MULTI-AGE LEARNING PRIMER:

How It's Different and Why That Matters

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HIGH MEADOWS SCHOOL

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The question isn't what are we teaching our students, it's what are they learning. This is the foundation of a multi-age classroom structure which creates a learning environment that is dynamic and cerebral.

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Two different systems of education

Dr. Sandra Stone, an author, speaker and founder of the National Multiage Institute, shared her experiences and research on the benefits of multi-age classes during a recent visit to High Meadows to facilitate multi-age teacher training and parent workshops.

She compared the two predominant systems used to organize children in school – the grade-level approach and the multi-age approach – and how they are at opposite ends of the spectrum. In most grade-level systems, we have the same expectations for children in the same grade, at each grade level, regardless of their developmental needs. Grade-level expectations become a tool for classifying children within a grade level ("above grade," "at grade" and "below grade"). The child who masters grade-level skills is a success; the child who does not is a failure.

The multi-age system, however, takes a developmental view of learning. The student's education is structured over several years to support his or her natural development, and the teacher's role is to lead the direction of that learning. Expectations for what children are learning are high, but appropriate. There are no grade-level comparisons and letter grades for the purpose of labeling.

As a result, children are more likely to cooperate than compete. The spirit of cooperation and caring makes it possible for children to help each other as individuals, not see each other as competitors.

The multi-age classroom

A High Meadows multi-age classroom is highly structured, it's just structured differently than many parents are used to. The class environment is carefully planned to enable children to learn at their own developmental level while increasing opportunities for cross-age interaction.

What will you see in the classroom?

Learning strategies…
<u>Whole group</u>: shared reading and math, read alouds, modeled writing, writer's workshop, etc.

<u>Small group</u>: guided reading and math instruction, literature circles, etc.

Classroom set-up…
- Centers
- Project work
- Inquiry study

The physical space supports large-group, small-group and individual activities to take place every day. It is designed around a "center" or project approach where learning tables are used, not individual desks. Students work in centers with the teachers visiting each of these smaller groups to teach a concept, then have the students explore it further through deeper conversation. This allows teachers more time with each child to observe and assess his or her particular understanding of an idea, and to see exactly how students are figuring things out.

This environment encourages inventiveness more than simply being lectured on a subject. Centers are designed to be open-ended so children can practice their skills and come in to the experiences at their skill level. By nature of the configuration and process, children solve more of their own problems and learn the social aspects of working with others.

Multi-age teaching strategies

High Meadows faculty members are highly committed to multi-age learning because it gives them the flexibility to guide their students' educational journeys in more meaningful ways. We are able to guide each child's successful growth on his or her own developmental timetable – even same-age students.

Children learn to read by reading, write by writing, and socialize by having opportunities to be social. To apply that understanding, we use many multi-age teaching strategies in both whole- and small-group instruction such as shared and guided reading, modeled writing, writer's workshop, developmental and guided math, discovery science, literature circles, and guided experiences in varying content areas.

Multi-age instruction challenges children at many different levels. Older students model more

sophisticated approaches to problem solving, and younger students are able to accomplish tasks they could not do without the assistance of older children. This dynamic increases the older child's level of independence and competence.

Specific activities are planned that offer new challenges to older children and we support their leadership roles in the classroom. At the same time, appropriate expectations are placed on younger students; teachers offer extra support when needed and encourage them to seek out the help of older children throughout the day.

Regardless of age, however, some students show exceptional skills in a particular subject. Multi-age learning offers the opportunity for any student to delve deeper into a subject and offers teachers the leeway to plan special activities that further challenge the student.

Also, the consistency of having at least one teacher for more than one year gives children almost an extra month of teaching time since the teacher does not need the early weeks in the school year to get to know each child. When students are able to spend longer periods of time with the same teacher, it allows the teacher to develop a deeper understanding of a child's strengths and needs, and is therefore in a better position to support the child's learning.

Student assessment

Multi-age education is a very precise way of learning. Expanding the age group of a classroom by a couple of years allows each student to find peers at his or her stage in each subject. The purpose is to help students successfully reach their next learning goals. Teachers first assess the needs of the child then design experiences and instruction around that understanding.

In the multi-age classroom, assessment is given for the benefit of the students, not to label, sort or rank children as is typical in the graded classroom. It documents each child's educational growth and development within the process and context of the actual learning. Student work samples, along with a narrative report, become central to understanding how the student is learning and how to guide his or her instruction. They also specifically communicate each child's achievements, potential and learning continuum to both the parent and the child.

How they compare

Here is a side-by-side comparison of a multi-age education with a more traditional graded system:

Grade-Level Approach	Multi-Age Approach
Curriculum is presented part to whole with emphasis on basic skills.	Curriculum is presented whole to part with emphasis on big concepts.
Strict adherence to fixed curriculum is highly valued.	Pursuit of student questions is highly valued.
Curricular activities rely heavily on textbooks and workbooks.	Curricular activities rely heavily on primary sources of data and manipulative materials.
Students are viewed as "blank slates" onto which information is etched by the teacher.	Students are viewed as thinkers with emerging theories about the world.
Teachers generally behave in a didactic manner disseminating information to students.	Teachers generally behave in an interactive manner, mediating the environment for students.
Teachers seek a "correct" answer to validate learning.	Teachers seek the students' points of view in order to understand their present conceptions for use in subsequent learning experiences.
Assessment of student learning is viewed as separate from teaching and it occurs almost entirely through testing.	Assessment of student learning is interwoven with teaching and occurs through teacher observations of students at work and through authentic experiences.
Students primarily work alone.	Students primarily work in groups.
Students receive grades.	Student work samples serve as documentation of student progress, illustrating learning success and areas of growth and guides teacher instruction.