

MULTIAGE

Mixed-age grouping. Simply defined, a multiage classroom is a *mixed-age group* of children that stays with the same teacher for several years. The children are randomly selected and balanced by age, ability, special needs children, and gender. This grouping is deliberately made for the *benefit of children*, not for reasons of economics, curriculum or convenience.

Implementation – Since a multiage grouping thrives on the diversity of learners for the richest cross-age learning possible, three years is preferred to two-year groupings. The multiage classroom is not a “dumping ground” for the needy children, nor is it created for advanced or gifted children. Balance by age, gender, and ability within each age level is critical for optimal learning. For example, a grouping of 18 children would have 6 six year olds (high, medium, low), 6 seven year olds (high, medium, low), and 6 eight year olds (high, medium, low) as best as possible. Classes are called *primary multiage* or *intermediate multiage*. Children are not referred to as first, second, or third graders within the class.

Multiage classes are not to be confused with combination classes. A combination class is usually two grade levels in one class. Each grade is taught its own separate curriculum. A true multiage classroom should not be called a “combo” class.

How children learn. Multiage education is based on the research on how children learn which results in the best, most appropriate, practices (developmentally appropriate).

Implementation – In the multiage classroom, you would expect to see children working and playing in centers and on projects based on their choice. Children should be *socially* engaged in meaningful experiences in mixed-age groupings. You would see teachers using whole group, small group, and individual instruction based on the needs and interests of the children. Teachers would be aware of the successful development of every child’s cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development (whole child), facilitating each child’s learning on his or her own continuum, and documenting his or her growth through authentic assessment (portfolio). Teachers should be providing a safe, nurturing, challenging environment where children can take risks in their own learning.

Child-centered versus curriculum-centered approach. Multiage education focuses on “*fitting the school to the children*” rather than fitting the children to the school.

In a curriculum-centered approach, the teacher covers a grade level curriculum whether it fits the child or not. In a multiage classroom, the teacher uses the available curriculum like an assortment of *tools* from which to choose the most appropriate ones to fit the child’s learning needs. The focus is on the *process of learning*.

Implementation – The multiage teacher does not teach with a lock-step grade level approach. For example, the multiage teacher does not teach a different graded curriculum for each age group. He or she does not separate the children into grade levels

and then teach the grade-level curriculum for each group. Instead, the teacher chooses to use strategies (e. g., shared reading, modeled writing, guided reading, shared math). Within whole group strategies, the teacher embeds broad-based skills and standards (simple to complex) so each child can enter in the instruction at his or her level of understanding. This approach also allows for both review and acceleration. Small group instruction is used to facilitate the successful growth of each child, depending on his or her needs. The decision for groupings is based on the needs or interests of the children, information gathered from assessment tools, not by age or grade.

Because of this child-centered philosophical approach, there is no need to label children by grade, age, or ability within a multiage classroom. There is no need for retention or promotion. There is no need to use homework to catch children up or to cover the curriculum. Each child can go as far as he or she can go. There are no limitations to each child's learning. Each child is engaged in the *process of learning* on his or her own continuum of learning. Research on the learning process (e.g., writing, reading) is used to construct the continuum. Standards are used as goals on the continuum.

Respect for the child. Multiage philosophy respects and honors the *differences* in every learner as natural and normal. Each child has his or her own learning style, learning rate, intelligences, background, and personality.

Implementation - Children in multiage classrooms see themselves as “fitting in” because the differences are considered natural and normal. Children are not ranked, ordered, and sorted based on some arbitrary criteria. Each child's learning becomes a personal journey. Respecting each child as an individual allows multiage teachers to celebrate the learning process without labeling a child as below, on, or above grade level norms. Children are not expected to be the same; some children will have strengths in communication or music and other children may have strengths in mathematical thinking or interpersonal skills. Each child is valued for his or her own uniqueness.

Focus on success. Each child's progress is viewed in terms of success rather than failure. The multiage philosophy rejects a “deficit model” that focuses on what a child doesn't know, rather than on what he or she does know. With the focus on success rather than failure, children see themselves as capable individuals.

Implementation - The multiage teachers provides repeated success for all children in the classroom no matter where they are on their continuum of learning. Children are given time to develop. Each learning step is celebrated by the teacher and with the child. Without labels, retention, and grade levels, children are free to learn at their own pace and to take risks that include learning from mistakes. Reporting systems include report cards without grades, narrative report cards, and portfolios that document progress.

Constructivist learning theory. Multiage education is built upon the strength of constructivist learning. As a child actively participates in her world, she constructs her own knowledge of it. The teacher cannot “present” or “give” knowledge to a child; the

child must construct it for himself. Each child's construction of knowledge is personal and unique.

Implementation – The multiage teacher commits to providing a learning environment that is highly experiential and social. She chooses centers, projects, play, and experiences as a daily portion of the instructional day. The teacher promotes choice for children because personal choice ensures that the learning will be meaningful for the child, and highly motivating for the child, and will occur at the child's level of understanding. The teacher will participate in on-going (daily) assessment, so he can understand what the child has constructed and then scaffold learning appropriately for the child through whole and small group instruction.

Social learning theory. Multiage education thrives on the research on social learning. The process of constructing knowledge of the world is not done in isolation but rather within a social context. Mixed age learners greatly benefit from the richness of their differences. Mixed age groupings (particularly three) provide for more collaboration, cognitive conflict, scaffolding of learning, prosocial skills (sharing, helping, negotiating, kindness), mentoring, and leadership opportunities than same-age groupings.

Implementation – The multiage teacher selects a heterogeneous grouping of mixed ages, balanced by ages, ability, gender and special needs. She does not compromise the richness of this learning context by making it more homogeneous by seeking children of same ability or distorting the balance by having too many needy children, too many high achievers, or too many children of one grade level.

The multiage teacher maximizes the opportunities for children of the same ages, as well as of different ages, to interact. This is usually accomplished by creating an environment focused on centers, projects, play, and social learning experiences. Choice for children ensures mixed age learning groups. The multiage teacher does not assign children to work, scaffold, or teach each other. This will occur naturally within a highly experiential and social environment.

Family unit. The multiage classroom creates a community of learners. The "family" includes the teacher, children and parents. Because of the extended years of a multiage classroom, the teacher, children, and parents have more time to get to know each other and become true partners in learning.

Implementation - As a multiage program is initiated, teachers and administrators provide early and on-going informational meetings for parents so they understand the philosophy and benefits of this positive learning organization for their children.