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[Issue Table of Contents](#) | [Read Article Abstract](#)

The Modern Multi-Age Classroom

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First, 2nd, and 3rd graders in a high-poverty school system learn from one another and flourish in a caring classroom.

A faded black-and-white photograph shows my grandmother standing with 17 of her elementary school classmates. The students vary in height and size, with the tallest ones in back and the shortest up front. Not only are those in the back much taller than those in the front row, but they also look several years older. My grandmother's script, in white ink on black album paper, reads "Dear Old School Days."

In the early years of the 20th century, 70 percent of U.S. public schools were one-room schoolhouses (Muse, Smith, & Barker, 1987). These same buildings also served as gathering places for the larger community. Like many students who went through these schools, my grandmother and her classmates forged lifelong bonds. They were like family to one another. Ninety years ago, U.S. students struggled with many of the same issues that students encounter today. Immigrants worked to assimilate into society, speaking one language at home and another at school. Children had to deal with such perennial problems as domestic violence, alcoholism, and neglect. They were fortunate if their school and the surrounding community became an extended family of sorts, a place where they could temporarily lay down their burdens as they

learned and practiced new skills that could lead them to a better life. Students today can benefit from the same kind of nurturing environment.

A Good Place to Learn

My team-teaching partner Theresa Crowley and I work at Rita Cannan Elementary School in Reno, Nevada. Hotels, casinos, convention centers, concerts, and special events draw approximately 5 million visitors each year to our community. Many non-English-speaking parents find work in the service industry's unskilled, low-paid jobs. Seventy percent of our students at Rita Cannan speak a language other than English in the home. Even the 30 percent who are native speakers of English often enter school with depressed vocabularies.

Many of our families live in poverty, with 88 percent of our students qualifying for lunch subsidies. The majority of our students do double duty: They reach for high levels of success and, at the same time, work to master the English language. We strive to provide a humane classroom environment in which they can accomplish these goals.

To combat our school's 49 percent transiency rate, we request that parents keep their children with us for three years. My team-teaching partner speaks fluent Spanish, which is a great help as we communicate our intentions to parents. Instead of requiring a signed formal agreement, we work to earn the parents' trust. In the schools in which we teach, we generally have the majority of our students for the full three years.

A Family, Just Like Us

I'm always surprised when people ask, "Why teach 1st, 2nd, and 3rd grade in one classroom?" "I can't think of a good reason not to," I reply.

Multi-age grouping builds strong relationships among teachers, students, and families. We also see it as an approach that validates the importance of a developmentally appropriate curriculum (Miller, 1994). The University of Nevada-Reno, which trains many of our local teachers, has a model multi-age classroom on campus that houses grades 1, 2, and 3. Spending time in that classroom and watching students and teachers interact sold me on the concept 20 years ago. Older students bring new students into the fold by showing them how the classroom works. We hear them coaching the younger children: "Try it again! Don't forget to use your strategies. Get your mouth ready to say the word." We also hear them comforting students: "That's OK. You'll do better next time. An 80 percent isn't a bad grade."

Students tell us in many ways just how important our learning family is. While teaching a math lesson to the older students one day, we huddled around the overhead projector. "This is a math family," I said as I pointed to a math triangle. "The numbers are all related. You know, like moms, dads, aunts, uncles, and cousins."

Standing on a chair with his arm propped on my shoulder, Juan exclaimed, "Just like us!"

Most multi-age teachers will tell you that teaming with another teacher helps (Miller, 1994).

Theresa and I joined forces three years ago to teach our multi-age classes in the same room.

Since then, our hallway discussions have evolved into much deeper levels of collaboration. We used to focus more on planning. Now we see ourselves as observers of children, looking at what has transpired in the classroom and what needs to occur to support each student every day. Team teaching has brought support, humor, problem-solving capabilities, and reflection into our teaching lives. We have benefited from the resulting growth and professional stimulation as much as our students have.

A Curriculum for the Whole Child

With our 32 students, my partner and I create a safe place where students can learn to think critically, take risks, and share joys and concerns. We let students know what we expect of them at school. Then the real, sustainable learning begins to unfold.

The Joy of Art

A boy new to the United States happened to enter our classroom the same day that we were scheduled to sing for a community outreach center. We worried that we might have traumatized him by putting him on stage to sing with the rest of the class. The next morning, our minds were put at ease when he asked Theresa in Spanish, "When are we going on the bus to sing?"

Students enthusiastically embrace learning when we sing, create pieces of art, dance, celebrate, laugh, and wonder aloud with them. Reaching them on an emotional level helps fuel the learning process (Jensen, 1998). Several times a week, we have students read a selection of their choice for 20 to 30 minutes. Many are drawn to the poetry and song charts that hang from racks in one corner of the room. Older students teach younger students the lyrics to a favorite song or lines from a favorite poem. By the time we formally teach the songs and poems, many of the younger students are already familiar with them.

Nonfiction and the Wonder of Snowflakes

Many primary students, when given the choice, prefer informational books to narrative texts (Kletzein & Szabo, 1998). Our students are fascinated with books about real people, animals, and nature. The rich picture support characteristic of many nonfiction books has the added advantage of helping English language learners relate English words to objects and concepts familiar to them in their native languages (Parkes, 2003).

Opening up the classroom to the great outdoors is a valuable way of building bridges of understanding between books and real-life experiences. In January, students pored over nonfiction books on weather, temperature, and the different states of matter, focusing on how water appeared as a liquid, solid, and gas. After looking at magnified photographs of snowflakes, students measured 60-degree angles and folded paper accordingly to make the six-point cutouts. A student suddenly looked up from her reading and exclaimed, "Holy cow! It's snowing!" Before I could blink an eye, the older students had helped the younger ones don their coats, hats, and gloves. With magnifying glasses in hand, we all marched outside to get a close-up view of the snowflakes that clung to the children's hair.

Younger students come to understand that our classroom culture highly values thinking and discovery. For example, 6-year-old Mirella told us, “I went to California to visit my cousins. At night, I couldn’t sleep so I looked at the moon and ‘thinked’ about it.” She was mirroring the love of learning and wonder that our older students model for the younger ones.

Sharing Stories Through Writing

Our students are insistent about sharing pieces of writing that tell of hurts, scrapes, domestic violence, and visits with social workers and police. They also press to read aloud their pieces about weddings, trips to roller-skating rinks, and visits with grandparents. Each time a student shares a personal narrative, we see nods of understanding and hear responses from others in the class who make personal connections to what the student is reading.

When Anne, a 3rd grader, asks Reyna, a 1st grader, “What did your party dress look like?”, we see Reyna voluntarily revise her story to include the information. We hear older students say to the younger ones, “I want more detail. I want to know more about the character.” This affirms for us that there are certainly more than two teachers in the classroom.

One of the most motivating triggers of all is when a 3rd grader makes the others laugh through a comical piece that he or she has written. The younger students can't wait to do the same.

We have found that when we give students time to write about personal experiences, both happy and sad, they are more apt to give their all to an assigned topic. We let them know that what they have to say and write matters. Because they hold their audience in high regard, they strive to produce high-quality work.

Math and Problem Solving

Good math instruction cultivates good thinkers. At the end of our students' three years with us, we want our 3rd graders to be able to think analytically and attack problems with perseverance and confidence.

Through math instruction, teachers can teach students how to analyze, evaluate, predict, infer, and create mental images in a concrete manner. These skills prove useful in reading and writing as well. Just as students sort shapes—such as triangles, squares, and circles—they also sort words as they learn to read according to concept, beginning letter, or vowel sounds. In their writing, they must sort and organize their thoughts so that their paragraphs support a main idea.

Math time is usually the noisiest part of our day. Our students are actively learning through manipulatives, games, and “out-loud” problem solving in addition to paper-and-pencil exercises. Theresa works predominately with 1st and 2nd graders, building strong math foundations. I work with 2nd graders who show a high aptitude for math along with my 3rd grade group. Some students alternate back and forth between working with the two of us, depending on their needs. Because 3rd grade is an important testing year for No Child Left Behind (NCLB), my group places heavier emphasis on test preparation.

We sometimes bring all the students together to play games or work on a common concept, such as fractions.

“If I cut a pizza into four parts, and I give you one part and me three, is that equal?” an older student asks teasingly as he cuts a circle into four equal parts.

“No way! I should get two, and you should get two,” a younger student exclaims. The enthusiasm associated with sharing new knowledge and insights is contagious.

How We Manage

Working with a group of students whose ages span three years is not so different from working with a group of same-age students. Children who share the same chronological age are not always developmentally in the same place. A task that is frustrating for one student might not be challenging enough for another.

How do we manage? During the day, we group students differently for different purposes.

Because we want our students to feel like part of a larger family, we begin and end the day with the whole group together. During those times, we take attendance and discuss a variety of topics, such as important upcoming events, problems, successes, and homework. One of us leads the discussion while the other works with individual students, communicates with parents, or takes care of a problem. We also gather the whole group together for such activities as teacher read-alouds, thematic study, art lessons, and singing.

We put our students into heterogeneous, cooperative groups when we want younger or less able students to learn from more capable students, who can solidify their own learning through such teaching. These groupings provide us with opportunities to observe strengths and weaknesses that are not always readily apparent. The weakest reader might be the best artist or communicator in the group. Watching these groups in action gives us a fuller picture of each student.

When our purpose is to increase or expand specific skills in reading, spelling, or math, we work with small, homogeneous groups. Students who are not participating in these groups work independently on various assignments, asking other students for help if they require it. This builds interdependence and strengthens community spirit.

Our teaching duties change throughout the day depending on the kind of groupings in place. We are facilitators and observers when our students work in heterogeneous, cooperative groups. We deliver intense, direct instruction in small-group settings. Whole-group activities tend to be teacher-led, shared experiences. This whole-group, small-group, cooperative-group choreography provides our students with a variety of ways to learn and practice new skills.

Does It Work?

We have found that when we let students navigate what Vygotsky (1978) called the zone of proximal development—somewhere between what they know and what they can know—we help them develop their brains.

Our students must act like writers, readers, and mathematicians before they ever assume mastery. This takes time. We let our 1st graders play with the language associated with thinking and analyzing text and numbers before we require mastery. We strive to reach certain benchmarks at each grade level, but we know that children can develop in uneven spurts and can reach plateaus where growth is not obvious for a time. The luxury of having three years is important to us.

We have hundreds of stories that support our belief that students benefit academically, emotionally, and socially from being in our multi-age classroom. However, we also understand that these success stories don't hold water in a data-driven system.

Last summer, we moved to Rita Cannan Elementary School to team teach in a multi-age classroom of 1st, 2nd, and 3rd graders. The new school was less than a mile away from the one in which we both had been teaching for seven years. We had been using the *Developmental Reading Assessment* (DRA) benchmark books to measure reading progress (Beaver, 1997). Books are divided into emergent, early, transitional, and fluent levels. Because our new school shared the same demographics as the other school, we had the rare opportunity to compare the DRA levels of those students who had been with us for two years before entering 3rd grade with those who entered as brand-new 3rd graders. Students who had spent the two previous years with us scored in the fluent range on average, whereas our new group of entering 3rd graders scored within the transitional range.

We are confident that our current 1st graders will successfully grow their skills to the level that many of the 3rd graders attained in the past at our former school. This year, some of our 1st graders' developmental reading assessment scores already surpassed the scores of many of the 3rd graders who were new to our class.

A Family of Learners

We see promise in the way that 1st grader Mirella cradles a notebook in her arms and marches around the classroom like a busy executive. We see it when Reyna and Neida sneak a peak at the *Junie B. Jones* book that Ms. Crowley has been reading aloud and then beg to take a copy home to read together. We see it when 1st grader Daniel writes in his response journal that he has "evidns" that the bear in the book *Corduroy* is sad, and then tells us *why* he knows. We see it when a feverish student shows up with his mother in tow, who exclaims, "I couldn't get him to stay home!"

Can we give our students "Dear Old School Days" in today's world? Theresa and I believe that the multi-age classroom does just that. It helps build relationships among students, teachers, and families. For us, it has become a supportive extended family in which our students flourish.

The whole art of teaching is only the art of awakening the natural curiosity of young minds for the purpose of satisfying it afterwards.

—Anatole France

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