**What are the benefits of a multi-grade classroom?**

1. There are many, perhaps more opportunities (because of the nature of the multi-grade classroom) for children to work and develop at their own level on a continuous basis.
2. Flexibility of grouping is beyond the normal range of ages and abilities and can benefit those children who are working below (or above) grade-level in certain skills.
3. Students are continuously exposed to **re-teaching,**as they listen in on, and benefit from, lessons being given to younger students.  This review of the basics reinforces and clarifies a child’s understanding, even when they may be working at a more advanced level.
4. Students are also exposed to **pre-teaching** (“eaves-dropping” on teacher’s lessons and discussions with older students).  This both prepares and stimulates the younger child’s thinking.
5. Academic, physical and social competition between peers is reduced, as is the anxiety and pre-occupation of having to compete. Consequently, discipline measures are needed less frequently. The learning and social atmosphere is cooperative rather than competitive.
6. Pro-social behaviors and expectations are modelled by the older students.
7. Older students have opportunities to genuinely help younger students learn.  Their teaching helps them clarify their own learning.  The cognitive development and self-esteem of both younger and older students are improved.  In single grade classrooms, this is experienced in “Buddy” activities, but in a multigrade classroom, this is happening all the time.
8. Multi-grade classrooms are less homogenous than single-grade classrooms, therefore differences are the norm and more easily accepted.
9. All children are expected to work independently at different times during the day. They receive more intentional training to be independent workers. Off-task behaviors diminish as self-discipline and accountability increases.
10. Lengthier time with the same teacher can increase trust, understanding of expectations, and positive relationships between teacher and students, and teacher and parents
11. Teachers continue to build upon their knowledge of each child’s interests, strengths and needs over the multiple years they teach a child.  Sometimes it takes more than one school year to find out how a particular child learns best.
12. The stability of having the same teacher for a number of years can increase emotional security, especially for those students who receive less support from home, or whose home lives are unstable or in transition.
13. Effective learning time in the first term increases when children return to the same teacher in September.
14. Children who need a few more months to mature have time to develop; they continue with the same teacher, and carry on at their own level, despite a new grade designation.
15. Children who are academically advanced or lagging, can easily take part in higher or lower level skills, while maintaining interactions with peers.

**Multi-grade Classrooms Are Nothing New!**

Our culture has become obsessed with isolating groups according to age; from nursery school to nursing homes, it is what we have come to expect.  Single-grade classrooms were an invention of the Industrial Revolution, and modelled after the workings of a factory.  Strangely, children were equated to parts that could most efficiently be “assembled” in a pre-determined order and method.   The decision to group children according to birth year had (and has) nothing to do with human development or how we learn.

**The Shift In Classroom Structure— This May Surprise You!**

Which nation boasts the highest literacy rate in the world? It’s New Zealand, a nation where multi-grade classrooms are common today, just as they once were in America. “Rural America has its own history of multi-age one- or –two-room schoolhouse. The one room school house offered certain attributes that were very sound educationally."  (Kasten and Clark)

First of all, children remained with the same teacher and primarily the same class of students for multiple years. School was a stable, reliable environment for the children…

Second, the mix of ages and abilities provided optimum opportunities for student collaboration [as] older students served as role models...

There was no apparent ceiling on the content taught, discussed, or overheard with the room, which benefited older students by design and younger students more incidentally.” (Kasten and Clark)

If multi-grade classrooms are so beneficial, why the shift to single-grade classrooms?

The answer may shock you: mass production. The concept of single-graded classrooms actually began in 1848 in industrialized Massachusetts as a way to “educate more children for less money.” (Kasten and Clark)  In other words, the students’ welfare was not the foremost reason when an “assembly-line concept” of education entered the classroom. “The practice of our present system [of single-graded classrooms] did not evolve from any research base… but it evolved and became a deeply ingrained tradition more by accident and economics.” (Kasten and Clark)

Economic concerns affecting classrooms in the 1850’s are still weighing on classrooms today. “One major reason people find it plausible that schools are inadequately funded is that they know many schools aren’t performing well….

 There are factors besides spending that contribute to school performance…. [The sooner] Americans realize that schools…would not perform substantially better if they had more money… the sooner we can have a productive debate on how to make the system work better.”(Greene)

This productive debate is best supported by research. Modern research into how students learn has exponentially multiplied in recent years. “Now that we have the scientific knowledge and empirical evidence to document the major differences in anatomical structure, neurological development, and the chemical and hormonal climate in developing boys and girls, we can innovate and sustain [the] educational techniques that bring the greatest benefit to all our children…” (Gurian)

“Multi-age classes are sometimes called family groupings. Just as family gains strength from the range of talents and interests of its members, the multiage class is enriched.”(Politano and Davies)  “When it comes to student affect [i.e. social relationships and attitudes] the case for multi-grade organization appears much stronger.  Studies indicate that younger children actively use older children to develop skills and to acquire knowledge while older children actively assert responsibility for younger ones and develop an increasingly sophisticated understanding of that responsibility. Age mixing provides opportunities for children to find others of matching abilities.(Feldman and Gray)

 **What About Academic Benefits?**

When children are excelling socially in a classroom, the environment has been created for academic achievement. Consider these endorsements for the multi-age classroom. The US Government reports: “Research evidence indicates that multi-grade instruction has a significant positive impact on student attitudes, and tends to enhance achievement outcomes under positive implementation conditions.” (ed.gov/pubs)  “Collective reports [on the multi-grade classroom] show a recognizable pattern. Studies show that children in multiage or family-grouped models score either similarly or better academically than their comparison peers in traditionally grouped classes. For example, some reports showed that multi-aged grouped children scored more favorably than did other children… Within some of the reports, children in the family-grouped models scored better in certain verbal skills, whether these skills were reading, vocabulary, or other language-related skills.” (Kasten and Clark) A word of caution is probably wise at this point. “It should be noted that standardized tests are a quantitative rather than a qualitative assessment. This is not to say they are not valuable, only that the value should be tempered with the tests’ inherent limitations” (Kasten and Clark). In other words, the above, glowing results are not provided here as an attempt to prove that a multi-grade classroom magically produces higher achievers than a single-graded classroom. Rather this information is provided to demonstrate that students in a multi-grade classroom are not at a disadvantage-- an unfounded fear often felt by parents not familiar with multi-grade classrooms.

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