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Mixed-Age Classrooms

By Andrew Pudewa

As a teacher, professional development presenter, and educational consultant, I have had, over the past twenty years, a chance to visit a wide range of schools and school districts—a range that one might say spans “the good, the amazing, and the disastrous.” One thing I have seen again and again is how the negative effects of age-segregated classrooms can creep in and undermine an excellent educational vision. The story typically goes like this:

A group of parents makes a Herculean effort to start a school—agreeing on an educational philosophy, choosing or developing curriculum, finding skilled teachers, securing a location, balancing a budget. The first year is tough but successful—with a family-like environment, usually with twenty or thirty students ranging K-6th in two rooms. During the second year, more students enroll, bringing with them the need for more rooms, more teachers, more materials. Being a good school, it keeps growing, and the increasing number of students gives hope of financial stability. But, with the fourth or fifth year, a change occurs; there are now “enough” students in each “grade” to fully age-segregate the classrooms. Then the school slowly and inadvertently begins to transform into an institution providing the very thing it was created to avoid. Kids get more clique-ish. Peer influence dominates social interactions. Teachers feel pressure to ensure that every child in the class is doing the same work at the same speed. The wonderful one-room schoolhouse environment that allowed for individual pacing, projects, and performance, has now become a conveyor-belt institution, providing an educational product at a predetermined speed. The magic is gone; original ideals are lost.

However, this almost inevitable scenario can be avoided, and in my experience, one of the most significant factors affecting the long-term success of a school is the decision to maintain mixed-age classrooms, even when enrollment allows for grade segregation. The best, most effective, alive, nurturing schools I have ever seen all have several things in common, and one of them is multi-age, multi-grade classes. Why? Four reasons: age segregation is fundamentally unnatural, it can be harmful to healthy social development, it will inhibit the growth of leadership skills, and it creates an artificial teaching and learning environment. Let’s consider these one at a time.

Humans are not born in litters. Very likely, the idea of putting 26 nine year olds in one room all day every day would seem unnatural, even absurd to most anyone living before the mid-1800’s. Throughout most of history, the family has been the optimal learning

environment, with children usually a year or more separated in age. Consequently they are able to teach and learn from one another in a natural condition, where seniority and rank are clear, responsibilities are commensurate with ability, individual interests and talents can be nurtured, and each can learn at an appropriate pace. In a family environment, readers will read to non-readers, skills can be developed gradually without competition and pressure, each learns to respect and care for others. Although teachers and tutors have often been employed to provide general instruction and specific training, the family has always been the best model for a school, because families are structured to nurture individuality, build character, develop skills, and train leaders.

What happens socially when children are age-segregated? Inevitably, it creates two harmful influences: 1) it becomes difficult to be a leader, and 2) it becomes much harder to learn from others. In a classroom where everyone is ten years old and supposed to be “equal,” two things become distinctly “un-cool.” A child is very unlikely to think: “Oh, that Johnny, he’s so polite, well-spoken, attentive—I really want to be more like him.” Conversely, Johnny isn’t likely to consider: “Oh, that Billy, he’s got some behavioral issues, I’d better be especially kind and helpful, and try to be a good example for him.” If Johnny and Billy are the same age, in order for them to have a relationship, Johnny will have to sink down to Billy’s behavioral and linguistic maturity level, because they have been put in an environment that infers they are “equal” in every way. Multiply this effect times twenty-seven, and you will see how a child in a group of age-segregated kids is essentially forced to operate at the lowest common denominator of language and behavior, or be ostracized. In a mixed-age grouping however, there is no pretense of “equal rank,” and it is perfectly okay to want to be like those who are older or more mature, and equally as alright to feel responsibility for those who are younger or less mature. Therefore, everyone is free to imitate up or emulate down—a healthy, nurturing social environment.

Consider leadership and mastery? In a mixed age classroom, it is not at all uncommon for the teacher to encourage the more advanced students to help the younger or less advanced ones. This can work well in reading, writing, and mathematics. Occasionally one will hear a parent complain that their student, who is “ahead,” is being “held back” by the teacher who wants him to use his time to explain something to another student. The ignorance of this statement is befuddling; any sensible person, upon a moment’s reflection, would agree that the very best way to learn anything well is to teach it to someone else! In fact, promoting an environment that discourages or prevents an accelerated student from teaching what he knows to others could almost be considered educational neglect—yet we do this every time we separate him from those whom he could be assisting. If we want to solidify learning, promote leadership skills, and build relationships of respect, a mixed-age classroom is far superior to the modern grade level system. Anyone who grew up in a one-room schoolhouse will confirm this.

What about the teacher? Isn’t teaching in a mixed age classroom much harder? Hardly. Grade level classrooms create artificial environments where teachers and administrators believe that they can march a child through a curriculum at a dictated speed, basing that assumption on the idea that children should have approximately

equal abilities because of their approximately equal age. Kids who fall outside that expectation must then be labeled “gifted,” or “special needs,” or they just become a discipline problem for the teacher. Anyone who has worked with children for any time at all will know that you could get twenty kids born on the same day, and you’d still have a range of three or four or more grade levels in reading, writing, and math ability. Grouping children by age does not, and never will, group them by ability. So the teacher who imagines herself responsible for every child learning everything she is employed to teach, is forced to “teach to the middle” of the group, seeing the top end get bored and the bottom end lost. Perhaps, once upon a time, when “grade” meant something other than “approximate age”—when you had to pass fourth grade to go to fifth, grades made sense. But now, there is no such thing as “flunking” fourth grade, and being in fifth grade means nothing other than being approximately 11 years old.

The optimal learning environment is one which allows each child to progress at his own rate—allowing sufficient repetition for mastery. In spelling, math facts, even reading and writing, some children will need more practice than others. While one student may learn a phonics rule or a math operation in ten repetitions and need no more to understand and remember it, a different student may need a hundred, or even a thousand repetitions before achieving that same level of mastery. Any parent with more than one child knows this. If teachers expect that every student in their class will gain mastery with the same number of repetitions, they are hoping for something that never has been and never will be. If, however, they acknowledge the fact that students will gain competence at different rates, they can teach accordingly, creating a classroom situation that encourages, rather than impedes, individualized instruction and practice. While mixed-age classrooms promote this type of teaching, age-segregated classrooms impede it. Although some traditionally trained teachers will claim this is difficult or even impossible, the most successful educational programs (*Kumon Math* and *Accelerated Reader* among them) are built on the foundation of individualized instruction and individualized practice schedules.

Let’s face it. Most schools factories, designed to produce a uniform product, not to educate an individual for life. Most of us survived our schooling, but most of us want something better for our kids—it’s just hard to give up the grade/classroom paradigm, as that is the only thing we know. To do something different, we will have to be bold. We will have to break that paradigm. The best way to do this would be to eliminate grades and create a different way to measure and acknowledge progress. Three schools that have done so come to mind, although there are surely many more.

The first school I worked at was a small, elite school in Pennsylvania with about 40 students age 6-13. They were divided into three classes: Junior, Intermediate, and Senior classes. Although a full time school, parental involvement was paramount. There were no grades, but eight achievement levels in three areas—Intellectual, Social, Physical excellence. The requirements for achieving the next level in each of the three areas were clearly stated, and each family took full responsibility for helping the students meet the requirements. The teachers’ job was to assist the family, inspire and guide the student. Students were promoted to the next grouping based on ability and

accomplishment, not age. Under such a system, letter grades and quarterly report cards were unnecessary. Everyone loved this school.

The second case where I've seen the successful elimination of grades is a small public school district in Alaska, which set up an evaluation and promotion system spanning ages 6-18, and provides a superior education to a primarily native population. There are seven content areas (reading, writing, mathematics, career & community service, health, science, social studies) with ten levels in each. Again, the requirements to go up level are clearly stated, and each student knows exactly what they need to be able to do for promotion. To graduate, a student must attain level eight or higher in all seven content areas. This system rightly places the responsibility for learning on the student and the family, with the teacher as tutor, coach rather than director.

Lastly, let us consider a remarkable public middle school in the Northwest. Technically a grade 5-8 school with over 300 students, every class has mixed grades, and no textbooks are used, except in math. The whole school studies the same period of history at the same time, and each class is responsible for researching and presenting an aspect of that history to the whole school. Science is inquiry-based, focusing on real research and experimentation. But most significantly, the school runs half a dozen "businesses"—some of which actually generate income, ranging from woodworking to flower-growing greenhouses, and the students change job every six weeks. Two eleven or twelve-year old girls gave me a tour of the building, and when we came to the aquaculture room, the quieter one suddenly piped up and barraged me with details. I asked her if she was working there, and she responded, "I'm the manager right now!" Here's a public school that seriously challenges age and grade level paradigms.

These are three remarkable and successful examples of schools that have maintained a mixed-age class structure, overcoming the weight of today's standardized-test-obsessed environment. There are others, but only a school with a strong vision and clear foundational principles will have that success, because the pressure to conform and look like the institution down the street will always grow as more people become involved with the school. To *do* something different, you have to be willing to *be* different. It can be done. It should be done, because it's the best thing for the kids.