

Reflections

Kitty Copeland

Program Specialist,
Vancouver School
District, Vancouver,
Washington



I found a new friend one summer. She must have sensed that I had not grown up yet because she came to my door to ask if I could play. We taught each other games. She wrote down my lunch order as she read the menu of our play restaurant. She read picture books, repeating the repetitious phrases that I had read to her. We read and we wrote for many different reasons. She never once said she couldn't read or write. She was very excited about starting kindergarten in the fall.

School had been in session three weeks when Jamie came to play one day. I suggested we read one of our favorite books, and she said, "Well, I can't read very many words." She stared at the title of the book, finally pointing to the word *fox* and saying, "That could be *fox*. It starts with *f* and the picture looks like a fox."

Just three weeks earlier, she had entered this book with confidence that there was a story there. Now she looked at letters. What had happened to my friend, who used to read to me? How sad that this child's confidence was gone in three short weeks of kindergarten.

"What did you do in school today?" I asked.

"All the children sat in a circle and each person went to the teacher and sang the alphabet song. If you sang it right, you got a Tootsie Roll. Those kids who can't sit quiet or if they bother someone else must go and put their heads down on their desks. Some kids laughed at the kids who messed up."

"What happened to the kids who didn't do it right?"

"They will get a Tootsie Roll when they sing it right."

This story shows us how learning can shut down very quickly. How I wished Jamie had been in a multiage classroom such as the ones described in this issue. The impact that classroom environments have on our learners should

make us aware of any hurtful teaching practices, instruction, or structure.

In this issue, the authors have shared how multiage grouping can provide a successful learning environment for all students. The authors have described multiage classrooms as a way for educators to change instruction and practices driven by grade level.

In the strong evidence about how children learn that is found in the classrooms described in this issue, we can see that a child's experience, background, learning needs or strengths, and interest have more to do with how children should be grouped than how old they are. Multiage classrooms are not simply a way to group students but a philosophy that supports each learner's continuous progress. The components of multiage that these writers have shared bring to the forefront effective teaching practices and the importance of learning as a social act. The potential of learners when they are not held back or pushed by grade-level constraints is highlighted by each author.

Kasten's piece gives some of the research findings and rationales that guide our thinking in recognizing the benefits that multiage classrooms provide to students, parents, and teachers. Lolli continues the rationale by adding what a student-centered curriculum looks like in a multiage classroom—how multiage environments are based on children learning from each other and developing cooperation; on flexible grouping; on meeting the needs of individual students; and on integrating subjects.

Rossman, Arnold, and Kidwell explain how they moved to more authentic assessment using the information they gathered for documentation and record keeping as well as communication with parents as a basis for instruction. In multiage classrooms, because of knowing the students over a longer period of time,

authentic assessment is much more informed and understood.

No child should have to slow down or hurry up with his or her learning in order to be considered as working on a mythical grade level. I have a friend with a daughter who is not being challenged in her classroom. She is very far ahead of “that grade level.” One Sunday night when she was putting her daughter to bed she sensed that her daughter was unhappy and asked her why. This first grader expressed that she didn’t like school. Being the kind of mom who builds on problem solving by using writing as a way of thinking, she worked with her daughter to generate the following lists.

Things I Don’t Like about School

I don’t get called on when I raise my hand (usually). I know about the things we do in reading.

I can’t find anyone to play with at recess.

I know a lot about math and I’m bored with the easy problems.

I’m not excited on Sunday nights because I don’t like school that much. The books in reading groups are really easy.

Things I Like about School

I like Fridays because we don’t have reading.

I like art.

I like science.

I LOVE workshop—it’s my favorite thing in school.

I LOVE my journal writing.

If this child had been in the Team 202 classroom described by Davenport in this issue, I don’t think the list would read the same way. Davenport gives a strong rationale for why inquiry cycles serve as a

framework for the multiage classroom. The key element that teachers must understand, as Davenport puts it, is that “it afforded each student the chance to be successful at his or her own pace and permitted me greater opportunities to meet the needs of all learners.” Davenport’s article reminded me of the complex process of the inquiry cycles. When I was teaching in a K–6 multiage classroom, these cycles became easier and more natural each year because of the strong learning community developed in a multiage classroom. New students were immersed by demonstrations of inquiry by students returning to the same environment.

The multiage classroom Team 202 is just, fair, and impartial. As with Team 202, the climate of a classroom should promote the dignity and personal adequacy of every student. Could this happen in a grade-level classroom? Sure. But based on my experience of teaching for 15 years in various grade levels, then 11 years in the K–6 multiage classroom, I know that the students in a multiage climate demonstrate higher degrees of self-actualization and self-regard as well as caring about others. Multiage classrooms are environments where the active construction of knowledge takes place within a social context.

One of the most fruitful aspects of collaboration in a multiage setting is that those who have more experience can partner with others who have less experience. The language of learning is the pivot of the classroom—not the mythical grade-level topic, lessons, and list of words, or texts.

In multiage classrooms, learners help and support one another. Children meet their needs based on support from those with experience, not age: Ten-year-old Diana helps eight-year-old Dana read the encyclopedia, yet Dana helps Diana with subtraction. Five-year-old Chris helps ten-year-old George read a

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National Geographic, but George helps Chris tie his shoe. Seven-year-old Kelsey helps me understand the political implications of the Vietnam War, and I help Kelsey understand how to use quotation marks when writing a conversation. Six-year-old Joe helps the whole class spell words, but Joe gets help from the whole class to feel comfortable about leaving Mom and Dad.

We want children to become strengths instead of liabilities. Time must be a friend in order for them to learn. We need students who are confident that they can and will learn whatever they need to learn. Authors in this issue have offered multiage as a way to structure learning to support our children.

My friend Jamie came over five weeks after kindergarten had started. I asked her if she wanted to read a book.

"No, I can't read," she said.

"What did you do in school today?" I asked.

"Everyone said their phone number and address. If you said it right, you got a sticker."

"What happened to the kids who didn't do it right?"

"They will get one when they do it right."

"Did you read or write?"

"No, but I can tell you what we can't do. You can't run, talk to other kids, touch other kids, talk loud, get out of your chair. . . ." The list went on!

"Are you going to read and write at school?" I asked.

Frustrated that I wouldn't give up this notion of reading and writing she said, "It is not that kind of school; this is like a preschool."

How I hope that her teachers read this issue about multiage classrooms. She deserves to work with teachers and other students who will support her learning. I want Jamie to know that school is a place of literacy, not a "preschool."

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