Advantages of Multi-Age Classrooms

There is abundant evidence that multi-age classrooms allow for the most well-developed child-centered environment.

Multi-age teaching strategies

Menachem Mendel Academy faculty members are highly committed to multi-age learning because it gives them the flexibility to guide their students' educational journeys in more meaningful ways. We are able to guide each child's successful growth on his or her own developmental timetable – even same-age students.

Multi-age instruction challenges children at many different levels. Older students model more sophisticated approaches to problem solving, and younger students are able to accomplish tasks they could not do without the assistance of older children. This dynamic increases the older child's level of independence and competence.

Specific activities are planned that offer new challenges to older children and we support their leadership roles in the classroom. At the same time, appropriate expectations are placed on younger students; teachers offer extra support when needed and encourage them to seek out the help of older children throughout the day.

Regardless of age, however, some students show exceptional skills in a particular subject. Multi-age learning offers the opportunity for any student to delve deeper into a subject and offers teachers the leeway to plan special activities that further challenge the student.

Also, the consistency of having at least one teacher for more than one year gives children almost an extra month of teaching time since the teacher does not need the early weeks in the school year to get to know each child. When students are able to spend longer periods of time with the same teacher, it allows the teacher to develop a deeper understanding of a child's strengths and needs, and is therefore in a better position to support the child's learning.

Student assessments

Multi-age education is a very precise way of learning. Expanding the age group of a classroom by a couple of years allows each student to find peers at his or her stage in each subject. The purpose is to help students successfully reach their next learning goals. Teachers first assess the needs of the child then design experiences and instruction around that understanding.

In the multi-age classroom, assessment is given for the benefit of the students, not to label, sort or rank children as is typical in the graded classroom. It documents each child's educational growth and development within the process and context of the actual learning. Student work samples, along with a narrative report, become central to understanding how the student is learning and how to guide his or her instruction. They also specifically communicate each child's achievements, potential and learning continuum to both the parent and the child.

Leadership Opportunities

Often parents worry that the younger children in a multi-age classroom will distract the teachers and take attention away from the older children. This is not the case. Older children benefit from the ability to lead younger children.

Leading, whether in guiding a new student or giving a bit of attention to a younger student who may be having a difficult time away from his parents, is a critical experience for a young child. These "soft" skills are vital in the emotional and social development of the child. As you can see, integrating this leadership mindset into the classroom shifts teaching strategies. There is not so much lecturing as there is group work, which is much more reflective of the real-world environment.

Academic Opportunities

Many parents worry that if their child is the oldest in the multi-grade classroom then he will not be challenged academically. In multi-age classrooms, teachers engage older children to "give" lessons to younger children. Younger children are encouraged to observe the older child's more advanced work. Older children benefit from the ability to teach. Teaching ingrains a concept.

Older children model more sophisticated, complex problem solving and critical thinking. So, younger children are able to develop skills without the guidance of an adult teacher.

In other words, if it weren't for the older child, the younger child would most likely have to seek, or rely on, the adult. So, the younger child develops independence and feels secure about his capabilities.

Same Teacher, Same Classroom

The child and her teacher are able to truly get to know and to trust one another over the years. The child becomes intimately familiar with the environment and begins to understand himself as a learner and as a person of the world. The classroom community is strong and family like in the children and teachers supporting and caring for one another.

Child Develops at his Own Pace

The "five-year-old" who isn't reading yet is not labelled as "behind" in a multi-age classroom. He is able to develop at his own pace and within the range of typical development (3 to 6 years old for language, for example) without feeling inadequate. The child has years to develop, rather than a shorter amount of time under loads of pressure, thereby allowing the child to progress and succeed according to his ability. The child sees himself as a unique individual able to learn as he needs to learn.

At the same time, the advanced learners are not held back by the "averages" of teaching to the middle of a traditional class. Rather, each child is stretched and stimulated to reach his own best ultimate potential.

Child-Led Learning Environment

A child in a multi-age classroom is able to develop over time within a supportive community according to his ability. As a result, he is able to lead his own learning. He is able to take control of his learning, to own it. The result is a lifelong love of learning. The child discovers reading, writing, math, science, geography, and so on his own. That is powerful.

Sources:

American Association of School Administrators
Innovate My School Coalition of Educators
University of Wyoming Education Department
American Montessori Association