

# The Perils of Multi-Aged Grouping

*It can succeed, but only with a detailed curriculum, excellent teacher training, low student/teacher ratios and clearly-defined standards.*

**By Andrew Nikiforuk**

*(Mr. Nikiforuk is the author of School's Out. He writes a regular column for "Family Magazine.")*

Walk into many big-city classrooms in Canada today and you'll find teachers and students alike struggling with a fad called "multi-aging." Also known as "family" or "mixed-ability" grouping, it's educational jargon for creating utopian classrooms where children of different ages and abilities help one another learn. Reform-minded educators call the set-up "progressive." Results-oriented parents and teachers call it unworkable.

Take the case of an Edmonton teacher who found herself charged with a combined grade 3 and 4 class. Of 25 students ages 7 to 10, three had behavioural or mental handicaps that would normally see them enrolled in a special-ed class. While the teacher helped the disabled kids with penmanship and ran herd on class rowdies, students at ease with *Treasure Island* and decimals tutored classmates struggling with *The Cat in the Hat* and the multiplication tables. With only two parent volunteers and a part-time teacher's aide to help, the teacher found herself running a three-ring circus: "I feel as if I'm spread out so much I don't know what the hell I'm doing."

Multi-aging is the latest enthusiasm and controversy in education. Its supporters — generally school superintendents and principals — maintain that the traditional, one-age, one-grade classroom is a sorry and inefficient leftover of the Industrial Revolution. The Information Age, they argue, demands much greater flexibility in the way children are grouped. (Mysteriously, they make no mention of budget constraints. But flexible groupings have an obvious appeal when there's no money for special-ed classes.)

Split classes themselves are nothing new. The idea of combining diverse students in a single class dates back to the one-room schoolhouse. But multi-aging involves a whole new philosophy of teaching and learning in which "child-centred" is the buzzword of choice. Students work in no-fail non-graded classes where they learn at their own pace.

For this utopian model to work, the faster students are expected to help the slower ones ("peer tutoring"). Meanwhile, teamwork on projects ("cooperative learning") is often evaluated on the group result rather than on individual terms. These innovations are supposed to build self-esteem, leadership skills and a student's "ability to relate to other," to quote promotional literature circulated to Calgary parents.

What the brochures don't say is that multi-aging has serious limitations. For starters, research on its academic effects says it only succeeds with a detailed curriculum, excellent teacher training, low student/teacher ratios and clearly-defined standards. Few of these quality controls exist in schools now experimenting with multi-aging.

Multi-aging crusaders are equally silent when it comes to problems with their individual teaching methods. Consider peer tutoring, a classroom tool that can be very effective — but only when educators understand its shortcomings. As good teachers know, stronger students can teach weaker ones the mechanics of, say, adding fractions, without necessarily teaching understanding. And while tutoring other students definitely reinforces the tutor's grasp of the material, it also means less time for new learning. Finally, peer tutoring can foster dependency when weaker students let their buddies do all the work instead of learning to do it themselves.

The sum of all these limitations is predictable. A comprehensive British report on classroom practices found that the wider the spread of ability in a class, the poorer the instruction for kids at either extreme. According to the U.K. study, up to a third of students fall into this educational limbo.

To be fair, some useful ideas lurk within the multi-aging concept. The notion that all children should be taught at their own level is both ancient and sound. In fact, most teachers have always tried to do this by dividing kids into smaller reading or math groups that reflect their similar needs and abilities. Flexible groupings also make sense because children learn different subjects at different rates: the math whiz who masters her multiplication tables in a week may need extra help on reading comprehension.

The point is, it doesn't take a multi-age classroom to accommodate these realities. Specially-created catch-up classes where students are grouped according to need, not age, will do the job. A Calgary school, for example, created a special grade 8 class for students who were "trying but not succeeding." Instead of failing or being passed on to grade 9, the kids spent the year strengthening academic skills and self-esteem — all in the absence of multi-aging.

Ultimately, the real problem with multi-aging is one of scale. It's good for kids to be exposed to those with backgrounds, experiences and abilities that differ from their own. But when a classroom's age and ability spread go too far, teaching can become a stressful activity, and learning a haphazard and uncertain one.

*(Reprinted with permission from Chatelaine, November 1993)*