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BREAKING THE Age Barrier

■ by MINDY SCHILLER

The single-age classroom is so engrained in school practice that it is scarcely noticed, multiage groupings often being the fruit of necessity alone. Schiller argues for the intrinsic pedagogic value of the multiage classroom.

“**W**hy is there this assumption that the most important thing kids have in common is how old they are?” asks educational innovator Sir Ken Robinson, in his well-known YouTube video, “Changing Educational Paradigms.” To date, the video has had roughly 11 million views. “If you are interested in the model of learning,” he goes on, “you don’t start from this production line mentality. This is essentially about conformity ... and I believe we’ve got to go in the exact opposite direction.”

Robinson’s statement strikes at the heart of an issue that’s been plaguing schoolchildren since time immemorial: class is either too hard or too boring. Unsuccessful students quickly grow disengaged, labeling themselves as “bad at school”—and, by default, everything else. Gifted students become bored or, more often, arrogant. The only students whose needs are truly met in a traditional classroom are those in the middle, if there really is such a thing.

Attempts to solve the problem are reflected in the proliferation of gifted programs on one hand and learning specialists and Individual Education Plans (IEPs) on the other. The thinking, presumably, is that when the two ends of the bell curve are siphoned off, teachers can finally cater to the middle.

Here’s an idea: what if there were an approach where students were not labeled as “top,” “bottom” or “middle,” but viewed as a fluid spectrum? Where the natural diversity of children’s abilities was celebrated as a tool for innovation, as opposed to a barrier to overcome?

Actually, such an approach already exists. It’s called the multiage classroom.

When, in 1988, Miriam Schiller began as principal of Akiba-Schechter Jewish Day School in Chicago, class sizes were in the single digits. She combined grades as a way of creating larger social groups for students. “As we got bigger and bigger,” says Schiller, “parents would ask me if I would be dividing up the grades like other schools do. And I would say to them, ‘Why? This works so much better.’”

At Akiba, classes are multiage by design, as they have been for the last 25 years. Children are grouped in two-year age spans, which means that in lower school, there are three 1st/2nd grade classrooms and three 3rd/4th grade classrooms. In middle school, where subjects are more compartmentalized, students go from 5th/6th grade to 7th/8th grade. The combination of students changes from one subject to the other—one’s classmates in science may not be the same as in math or history—but they all include at least two grades.

“I never have to explain the multi-age classroom to families that are here,” says Schiller. “They see how successful it is. Only when I talk to prospective families do I remember what ‘normal’ is. Why would I ever go back to ‘normal’?”

In fact, when Schiller explains the benefits of this technique to prospective parents, they often ask her why other schools don’t follow it. In the meantime, the multiage classroom has become one of the school’s strongest selling points.

The Benefits of Multiage Classrooms

Unsynchronized Learning

“In a normal classroom,” says Schiller, “children are on a spectrum. Teachers teach to the middle, remediate one end and



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enrich the other. At Akiba, we take the ‘real’ norm and make it the established norm.” In other words, students naturally progress at their own rate—regardless of what sorts of external demand are placed on them. The traditional graded classroom forces them to align their progress with an imaginary timeline. Thus, students who are falling behind often fake mastery of a subject—building on a weak foundation—and faster students often are forced to slow down. Any child who isn’t synchronized with the traditional schedule forever feels behind and begins a spiral of failure. In contrast, because the multiage classroom covers a two-year span, children have more time to develop as they naturally would, without an external timetable.

Take Paula as an example. Paula was a young first grader and had a very difficult time learning to read. In fact, it wasn’t until midyear that she finally started to grasp the concept of decoding. Once she did, however, she catapulted forward, progressing through the next levels so quickly that she made up for her time lag earlier.

Paula’s process is not unusual. With various ages in the classroom, it’s assumed that there are also many skill levels. There is no expectation that all children will be ready to learn a certain skill simultaneously. Consequently, while Paula was still a little “behind” the other students at the end of 1st grade, she was far ahead of many of them at the end of 2nd grade.

Self-Esteem

Imagine if Paula had been in a traditional graded classroom. She would quickly have grown aware of her inability to master decoding and her self-esteem would have taken a nosedive. This, in turn, would have prevented her from actually progressing. At Akiba, Paula had the time to advance at her own rate. She was only one of many children on the spectrum of the classroom, and thus able to experience continuous success. Similarly, once she was ready to progress more quickly, she was able to do that.

In multiage classrooms, the natural diversity of children’s abilities is celebrated as a tool for innovation, as opposed to a barrier to overcome.

The children who are more mature have a group to associate with. And the children less mature can fall back if they’re not yet ready.”

Differentiation

The model is beneficial not only for the student, but for the teacher as well. According to Miriam Kass, staff development coordinator and former 3rd/4th grade teacher at Akiba, the multiage classroom allows the teacher to create a more open-ended classroom and then differentiate based on the child. “In traditional classrooms,” says Kass, “a good teacher will try to differentiate for those students who stick out on either end. But in the multiage classroom, differentiation is the default.” In other words, the onus is on the teacher to constantly consider how best to reach each student—whether he needs remediation or is ready to fly. “Nobody’s doing the straight and arrow, so the ‘outliers’ don’t stand out as much. I don’t think I had a typical 3rd grader or typical 4th grader,” she adds.

Differentiating instruction can be difficult, but according to Rotfeld, it’s made easier within the two-year loop of curriculum. “The two-year span allows

you to take a break from your topic and then when you return to it, you have fresh eyes. It promotes creativity.”

Schiller points to another benefit of the multiage approach, one she discovered in her many years of teaching students how to read.

A multiage classroom encourages creative redundancy, the concept of teaching a child the same concept but in a different way. She recalls one student who came from another school and who had been told he could not learn to read. A learning specialist evaluat-



A 5th and 6th grader conduct a physics experiment in science class with their home-made race track

In a typical classroom, a good teacher will differentiate for students who stick out on either end. In the multiage classroom, differentiation is the default.

ed him, discovering that in fact he was extremely bright. When the learning specialist shared this with his previous teachers and asked them how they might approach him differently, they replied that they would essentially just have to repeat everything again—perhaps more loudly and more slowly. In contrast, creative redundancy accepts the fact that the first method of instruction did not work and therefore cannot be tried again; rather, a new method must be introduced. In a multiage classroom, because of the wide spectrum of abilities, teachers are constantly forced to develop multiple ways of teaching the same skill. A student who has finished reading level 1-1 but is not yet ready to advance to level 1-2 needs a different book at the 1-1 level.

In a multiage classroom, your friends are your friends because they're your friends, not because they're the same age.

Thankfully, the child in question entered first grade at Akiba and is now able to read, because the multiage system had already created an environment of differentiation.

Social Skills

Multiage settings foster cooperative learning skills necessary in a democratic society. Children learn to work with older and younger peers, which more accurately reflects the world they'll encounter as adults. "It creates a more natural pool of friends," says Kass. "Normally, as a student, you're basically told you'll be friends with the same people for the next 12 years. But in a multiage classroom, your friends are your friends because they're your friends, not because they're the same age." While a child is a 3rd grader one year and thus on the younger side, he will be an older and more experienced student to the new group of 3rd graders coming into the class when he's a 4th grader. In addition, because of this overlapping of grades, students are easy friends with kids both older and younger than them.

Scott Salk, a 1st/2nd grade teacher at Akiba, loves the feeling of community created in this setting. "Although initially wary, if not fearful, of teaching in a multigrade classroom after many years with a single grade, I have become a huge believer," he says. In public school, where Scott taught previously, he had always tried to run a classroom that allowed children to move at their own pace, supporting their strengths and weaknesses, and encouraging collaboration. In his experience, the multiage classroom has magnified these outcomes. "Ability levels have a wider range but are thankfully murkier," he says. "Competition is minimized in favor of collaboration and helping one another. While often the older kids are helping younger kids, it's not always the case since more advanced 1st graders will do more helping while 'slower' 2nd graders can always get the help they need without really standing out as such. And there is little as educationally beneficial as one child helping another."

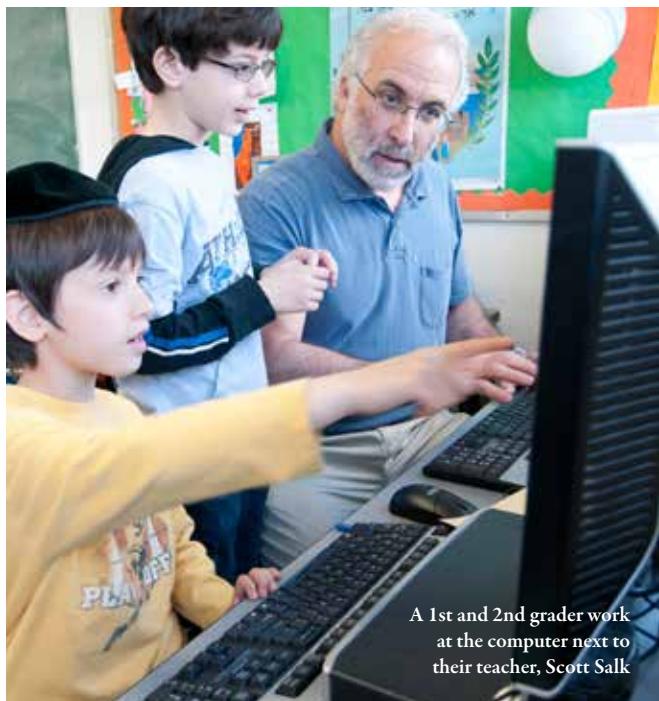
Multiage classrooms also promote deeper student-teacher relationships, since teachers work with each child for two years. "It takes time to get to know someone," says Kass, "to develop a relationship not just with the child, but with the family. And to think that after nine months I would have to say goodbye to my students—whom I've just gotten to know? That would be really sad."

Ability to Reach Higher

Every student has a right to learn something in school in every class, yet often the gifted learn the least. Much of what they are asked to learn in a traditional class they have already mastered. Teachers often make them classroom helpers or let them read books on their own. Consequently, the gifted child is not given the opportunity to learn through "real struggle." If gifted students are not exposed to challenging material, they will not learn how to learn and will certainly not develop the study skills they need for future serious academic pursuits.

Schiller tells the story of one alumnus who, upon entering freshman year at his high school, found that many of his Judaic classes were repeating the same material he had already mastered. So after much communication with the administration and sitting in on other classes, he arranged to take sophomore Judaic classes instead. When his freshmen classmates found out about the arrangement, they were confused. "If you take sophomore classes this year, junior classes next year and senior classes junior year, what will you do senior year?" This question had never occurred to this alumnus. For his peers, who were coming from traditional classroom settings, it was almost as though there was a finite amount of material to be learned and come senior year, this alumnus would have "run out of things to learn." Coming from Akiba, where the spectrum was as wide as the students who created it, this

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A 1st and 2nd grader work at the computer next to their teacher, Scott Salk

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was a paradigm shift. The most effective form of motivation is self-motivation, and when children know they are the sole owners of their progress, they may fly to the stars and beyond. Consequently, many do.

Self-reliance

In a multiage classroom, given the breadth of skill levels, no teacher can instruct the entire class all the time. Consequently, says Kass, children are more engaged in their own learning because the teacher is not an integral part of every lesson. "As a teacher, I have to create opportunities for kids to be engaged in small groups and in various roles." This kind of control over their own learning translates into more self-reliant children who actually take responsibility for their learning and are not totally dependent on the teacher to direct it.

Humility and Leadership

Remaining in the same classroom for multiple years provides every child with the opportunity to be both a learner and a teacher. A new student in a multiage classroom learns from older/brighter role models. As he ages in the group, he will have the opportunity to teach others—thereby building in redundancy to master concepts—and become a leader to younger/slower students. Most people will agree that there is no better way to learn a topic than to teach it. More important, this type of scenario creates character traits like humility and leadership. No student should feel he is always at the top or bottom of a class. Because the multiage classroom is a fluid learning community, he will be each at some point in time.

Perhaps the greatest benefit of the multiage classroom is that its culture permeates the entire school, creating a stronger and more authentic community. Cross-pollination between ages is the norm, not the exception, so children naturally feel connected to a larger pool than simply their own age group. This year, for instance, because of rising enrollment, Akiba divided what had always been an all-school play into two separate plays: one performed by the lower school and the other performed by the middle school. In end-of-year evaluations, many students complained about this division, claiming they wanted to return to a performance where everyone was included and 1st graders could mix with 8th graders. The administration is now seeking outside venues in which to perform the play so that every child can fit on stage.

Sir Ken Robinson rails against the concept of compartmentalizing children simply because of what he calls their "date of manufacture." To him, age is an arbitrary and misleading wall that should be torn down. If the students' end-of-year responses are any indication, these walls have already been torn down.

Students of any educational institution ultimately graduate and become contributing members of society, where they are asked to collaborate with peers of varying ages. Jewish day schools aim to develop not only contributors to society, but leaders of it, and great leaders inherently understand the power of community. At Akiba, multiage classrooms have created a vibrant community of learners. ■



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