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C r e a t i n g t h e M u l t i a g e
C l a s s r o o m

Sandra J. Stone

Illustrated by Yoshi Miyake

DEDICATION

To my children—
Jeff, John, Jason, and Brian



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CHAPTER TWO

CREATING YOUR OWN MULTIAGE PHILOSOPHY

It is important for you to develop your *own* statement of multiage philosophy grounded in research and appropriate practice. This philosophy will *guide* your practice and will be instrumental in *evaluating* your program. This part of the process is crucial to the development of an effective multiage program for the children and for you.

Use the following planning sheets to help you formulate your multiage philosophy. If you are working with a team of teachers, decide together what your beliefs are. Begin with the fundamental tenets of multiage education discussed in Chapter 1, but be sure to put them into your own words. Strengthen ideas that are particularly important to you. Your philosophy should reflect what you value. Claim ownership. Make the philosophy for your multiage classroom your own.

MULTIAGE PHILOSOPHY

.....

Planning Sheet

1. How do young children develop?

(Consider the whole child: socially, emotionally, aesthetically, physically, intellectually.)

2. What motivates young children to learn?

3. What do young children need to learn?

(Consider the whole child: What would be a good curriculum for young children?)

4. What should be your role as the teacher of young children?

5. What is the role of the environment in the development and education of young children?

(Consider physical, aesthetic, intellectual, social, and emotional environments.)

6. How can you appropriately assess young children's growth?

7. What is the role of the parent or guardian in the school?

8. What can a multiage classroom do to help you provide a good environment for young children to grow and learn?

Let your answers to these questions help you to decide on a philosophy for your multiage classroom. What implications does your philosophy have for your multiage classroom? First, develop general ideas and then select specific examples to demonstrate how your belief philosophy will affect the classroom. Use the planning sheet provided on p. 28 to record the results. Use your philosophy statement to guide your practice and evaluate your program.

MULTIAGE PHILOSOPHY

.....

Planning Sheet

Philosophy	General Implications	Specific Examples



Sample Multiage Classroom Philosophy and Foundation Statements

The following are examples from various programs that have developed personal philosophies for their multiage classes. Each statement contains key elements that are common to good multiage programs.

Philosophy Statements

THE PRIMARY PROGRAM, MINISTRY OF EDUCATION, PROVINCE OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

The Primary Program nurtures the continuing growth of children's knowledge and understanding of themselves and their world. It provides a safe, caring, stimulating environment where learning flourishes.

The Program recognizes that children are individuals and every child is unique. The Program accommodates the broad range of children's needs, their learning rates and styles, and their knowledge, experiences, and interests to facilitate continuous learning. It achieves this through an integrated curriculum incorporating a variety of instructional models, strategies, and resources.

The Program honors the development of the whole child. It reflects an understanding that children learn through active involvement and play and that children represent their knowledge in a variety of ways. It recognizes the social nature of learning and the essential role of language in mediating thought, communication, and learning.

The Program views assessment and evaluation as integral components of the teaching-learning process. Assessment and evaluation support the child's learning; they assist the teacher in making appropriate educational decisions.

The Program values teachers and parents as partners in the child's education. Teachers and parents consult and collaborate to create for the child a climate of respect, success, and joy necessary for lifelong learning.

(Reproduced with permission of British Columbia Ministry of Education, Skills and Training.)

KENTUCKY'S PRIMARY SCHOOL PROGRAM

The Kentucky Primary School Program nurtures the continuing growth of children's knowledge and understanding of themselves and their world. This nurturing environment is characterized by developmentally appropriate practices, multiage, multiability classrooms, continuous progress, authentic assessment, qualitative reporting methods, professional teamwork, and positive parent involvement. We believe a program demonstrating these characteristics provides a safe, caring, stimulating environment where the child grows and learning flourishes.

The Primary Program recognizes that children grow and develop as a whole, not one dimension at a time or at the same rate in each dimension. Therefore, the program reflects an understanding that children learn through active involvement using instructional practices that address the social, emotional, physical, aesthetic, and cognitive needs of children.

The Primary Program provides a classroom climate that is noncompetitive and encourages children to learn from one another as well as from their teachers. Diversity of skills and knowledge is accepted and accommodated by grouping and regrouping children for an effective instructional program.

The Primary Program flows naturally from the preschool program and exhibits developmentally appropriate practices. These practices allow for the broad range of children's needs, learning styles, knowledge, experiences, and interests. Children can experience success while progressing according to their unique learning needs. Continuous learning is enhanced through a coordinated and integrated curriculum incorporating a variety of instructional strategies and resources including play.

The Primary Program views authentic assessment and qualitative reporting methods as integral components of the teaching-learning process. This continuous assessment supports a child's learning and assists the teacher in making appropriate educational decisions.

The Primary Program values teachers and parents as partners in a child's education. Teachers regularly collaborate, plan, consult, and involve parents to create for children a climate of respect, success, and joy necessary for lifelong learning.

"In every task the most important thing is the beginning . . . especially when you deal with anything young and tender."

—Plato, *The Republic*.

(Kentucky's Primary School: The Wonder Years, undated p. 7)

SCALES PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT SCHOOL, TEMPE, ARIZONA

We believe Scales multiage program promotes a noncompetitive, cooperative, caring atmosphere, where children grow at their own developmental rate utilizing learning styles and areas of high interest in an integrated curriculum. Children (ages 5, 6, and 7) have the same teacher for three years. This component helps to ensure success in the early years of school by allowing time for a strong family unit and a nurturing relationship with the teacher. In the multiage program, we strive to celebrate learning through an active, hands-on approach, cooperative groupings, self-direction, peer tutoring, and developmentally appropriate practices. The curriculum promotes an integrated language approach that includes the following:

1. Reading and writing across the curriculum;
2. The teacher as facilitator of learning, providing an environment where each child's potential can be fully developed;
3. Children working at different developmental levels;
4. Flexible, instructional groupings based on needs;
5. Assessment based on the individual child's stage of development; and
6. Opportunities for children to be leaders and mentors.

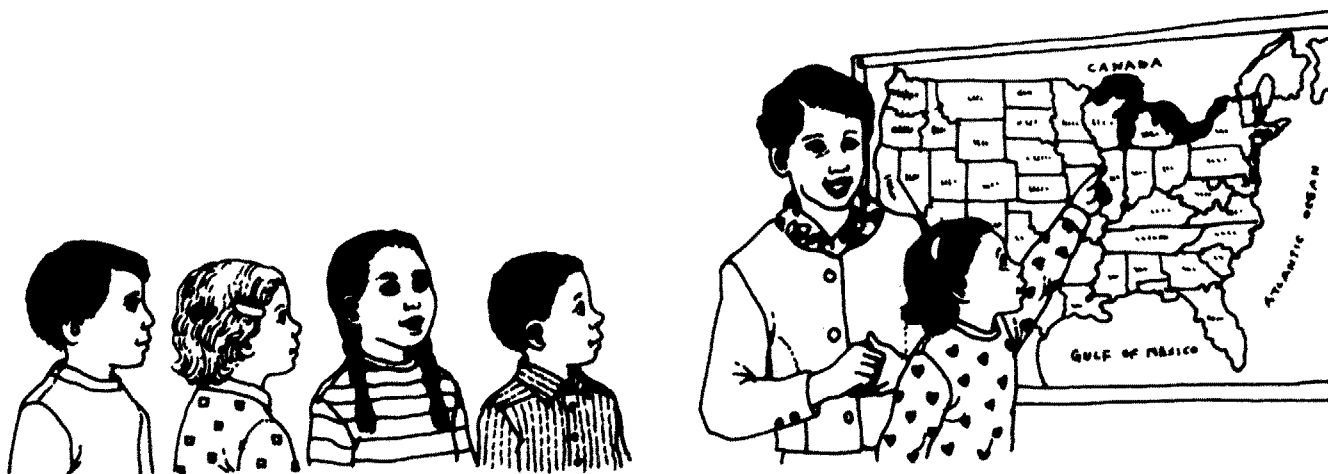
(Scales Professional Development School Brochure, Tempe, Arizona)

Foundation Statement

After the overarching philosophy statement has been crafted, a foundation, or mission, statement can be distilled from it for publication or presentation. This statement should express in a paragraph the beliefs and direction of your multiage classroom. Note how the Scales Professional Development School philosophy statement has been condensed into the succinct mission statement that follows.

SCALES PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT SCHOOL, TEMPE, ARIZONA

Mission Statement: We believe Scales Multiage Program promotes a noncompetitive, cooperative, caring atmosphere, where children grow at their own developmental rate utilizing learning styles and areas of high interest in an integrated literate environment.
(Scales Professional Development School Multiage Brochure, Tempe Elementary School District #3)



AVOIDING THE PITFALLS

Multiage teachers may stumble over these common pitfalls if they are new to the process. Making good decisions regarding your multiage program is critical to its success.

TEACHING CURRICULUM, NOT CHILDREN. For a multiage classroom to succeed, it must focus on teaching children and not teaching curriculum. Some teachers try to use a different curriculum for each grade level in the multiage classroom. This never succeeds, and it puts undue stress on the teacher. A multiage classroom is not three separate grade levels in one class; it is one class of multiage learners. The teacher who uses a first-grade reader for the first graders, a second-grade reader for the second graders, a third-grade reader for the third graders, and so on, is doomed to fail. The multiage teacher must see her children as one class of

mixed-age learners who are in the process of learning, each one at a different stage. She simply cannot teach three different curricula and survive.

SELECTING AN INAPPROPRIATE MIX OF CHILDREN. Teachers sometimes err in the selection of children for their multiage classrooms. Some interpret the mixing of ages as an opportunity to put all the children who are of lower abilities across several grade levels into one multiage classroom. This is a serious mistake! Such a class becomes emotionally draining.

Other teachers select children based on whom they perceive will be compatible with multiage learning, often the high achievers. Some schools maintain waiting lists for their multiage classrooms. When parents see how beneficial the multiage classroom is for children, they want to enroll their children in these classes. Oftentimes these are parents who have high expectations for their children, and the children tend to be high achievers. Selecting only above-average children for multiage classrooms is also a serious mistake! Such a class provides a closed-ended curriculum instead of an environment that inspires and promotes individual growth.

Another problematic combination is putting together all the top first-grade students and the low second-grade students. This type of aggregation is disastrous for both the children and the teacher. This competition is not productive or healthy for many children.

The multiage classroom works best as a heterogeneous group of learners. For each age level of children, there should be a representation of high-, average-, and low-learners. Balancing the class with a variety of learning rates creates the most beneficial learning and teaching climate. This balance encourages both teacher and children to see each student as an individual on his own continuum of learning. Without the balance, it is tempting for the teacher to group by ability across grade lines, thus counteracting the many benefits of mixed-age learning.

NOT ADEQUATELY ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF THE OLDER CHILD. Many parents and teachers who are new to multiage classrooms wonder about the older child in the

multiage classroom. Will this child be challenged enough in a group of younger children? It is imperative that the multiage teacher keep the older child's needs in focus. Enter each year with the goal of taking each child as far as his potential will allow. An observant teacher will keep her focus on the needs of every child.

One of the great benefits of the multiage classroom is that each child can grow to his potential. In same-age classes, the curriculum dictates how far a child can go. In the multiage classroom, the curriculum is open-ended for all children. Even though the older child may be the age of most third graders, he might be reading on a fifth-grade level or solving problems at a fourth-grade level. There is no ceiling on the progress a child can make in a multiage classroom.

NOT CONSIDERING PARENTS, ADMINISTRATORS, AND COLLEAGUES. A successful multiage will involve parents, colleagues, and administrators right from the beginning. New multiage teachers frequently complain that the parents just don't understand what the teachers are doing.

Parent education at the onset is critical. Parents need to feel comfortable with the process before they can ever become advocates of multiage classrooms.

Meet with parents before implementing a multiage classroom. If presented well, most parents quickly see how beneficial the multiage classroom will be for their children. However, respect a parent's decision not to allow his or her child to participate in multiage classrooms.

Administrators and colleagues also need to understand the philosophy and goals of the multiage classroom. Educating administrators and colleagues will defuse many a future misunderstanding.

Multiage teachers in schools with traditional grades must not be critical of other teachers who do not choose to establish multiage classrooms. Keep in mind that change is slow. Alienating people by criticizing their instructional strategies will never encourage the sharing of ideas. Respect all colleagues.