

# Multi-Age at Riverfield Country Day

**M**ulti-age grouping! This is not a new idea. It is a wonderful idea being recycled. In fact, when I went to grade school during the '40s, in a one-room schoolhouse, there were children from grades one through eight all in the same room. I can still remember the teacher, Mrs. Way. She made me feel welcome from the very first day.

As the youngest child in the neighborhood "group," and one who was not officially old enough to go to first grade with my buddies (no kindergartens in those days in Pennsylvania!), my mother convinced Mrs. Way that I should come with my friends. I remember all of the older children helping us with our arithmetic. We read to them frequently, and they also read to us each day. On the playground we all jumped rope together and played hopscotch and marbles — just like a family. When we walked home for lunch and after school each day, the older students helped us cross the streets and saw us safely home.

by Marty Clark and faculty



*Marty Clark is past-president of OKAEYC, and a board member of the Child Care Resource Center. She served on the Mayor's Commission on Women, and Tulsa Junior College's Task Force for Early Childhood Education. She is also a*

*validator and mentor for NAEYC.*

No wonder I felt right at home in the early '70s when I visited some of the British primary schools in their prime. A class of 40 five, six, and seven year olds with one teacher would run so smoothly that one hardly noticed the teacher in the math area helping some children with their sums or reading to a child in the book corner. There were *imagination* areas in each room where a supply of *junk* materials encouraged children to make *creations* — boxes, tubes, packing material that had been brought from home. One principal told me they received \$12 per year per student for supplies, so they depended on this *junk* for their art program. All the school purchased was paint and glue; everything else came from donated, discarded materials.

Shortly after this life-changing trip to England, I was able to help start a school in Colorado Springs for K-6th grades and to teach the K-2 class for four years. Fortu-

nately, in the years since then, I always taught in a class (or started a school — four of them) that had mixed ages.

Multi-age teachers need to establish a curriculum for each child in a multi-age classroom which requires one to look carefully at all students individually to see where they are and what they are ready to do. No more *pour-and-store* teaching or *teacher-in-front-of-the-class-all-day-teaching-everyone-the-same-thing-at-the-same-time*. Of course it looks very familiar to an early childhood person, as this is the way many developmentally appropriate classes work, even if they are not multi-age.

### An early childhood teacher's perspective . . .

the pluses for multi-age are many. Riverfield Country Day School in Tulsa, Oklahoma, is now in its 15th year of multi-age teaching and learning. In preschool, three, four, and five year olds are grouped together. In the beginning of this school year, just two weeks after school began, teachers commented that the returning fours took such good care of the incoming threes, that they (the teachers) were free to interact more with the children on quality issues, not just routines. One older child even explained to a new one that "After you eat all of your lunch, you get a cookie." It certainly helps to know the important things right away, and fours help to see that you follow the rules!

The transition was easy for parents and children, as half of the group was already familiar with the classroom and the routines. For example, the older children led songs at group time, taught the younger ones how to buckle the seat belts on the bus for their weekly field trip, tied shoes, showed them the restroom and hand washing routine, demonstrated how to use the swings and cross the monkey bars. They set the pace for "Share and Tell," as they had learned the previous year from *their* four year old mentors, by asking, "Does anyone have any questions or comments?"

Threes seem to connect quickly with the fours and enjoy having a friend or buddy who can help them out. At first, some threes are quiet and observe the action. They often get to be the "baby" in dramatic play. The fours organize, lead, and talk, often encouraging their younger friends. In using manipulatives, threes seem to dump and pour items and carry them around for themselves. Fours sort and classify by several attributes and threes observe with interest. The continuity from year to year is very evident in these classrooms.

Sometimes it is a challenge to convince parents that it is all right for the children to be in the same room for two years and to have the same teacher again. But after a short time, they see their child blossom and wonder why

they ever questioned the multi-age concept. They have repeatedly told us they are very pleased with the groupings and their child's progress. Here are a few of their comments:

*One mother writes: "Since this is my son's second year in the red class, I have had the opportunity to watch his progression in a multi-age class. During his first year, he seemed to really enjoy learning from some of the older children who helped him with his seat belt on the bus or taught him new soccer skills. Now that he is in his second year, he seems to enjoy being the one to help the younger ones and he's happy to have some of his friends still with him from last year, too! With the mixed ages, it allows the children to interact with a variety of ages and skill sets and teaches them to help each other."*

*Another parent says: "When my son became one of the older children in the three to five class, it was gratifying for me to witness the marked growth in self-confidence and leadership abilities that occurred."*

The beginning of the year was smooth for teachers and parents. One parent immediately saw a noticeable change at home, as her son "feels like he is one of the older children. He is more responsible and takes the initiative with us" (at home). Parents also see social growth and are pleased to hear their children "using their words" to solve their problems at home and at school. Children in a typical "all threes" classroom are dependent on their teacher for help and are somewhat "babyish"; whereas the threes in a multi-age three and four year old room mature and become independent more quickly.

### From a child development viewpoint . . .

the teacher is able to observe the child's growth over a two year period, in every area of development. There is no need for a "getting to know you" period each fall for the half of the class whom the teacher had last year. Teachers say it is so encouraging to see the growth and maturity over the summer, too. They observe children doing things when their own time clock says they are ready. Teachers are also grateful to have a room of mixed ages, rather than one full of those "wild and wonderful" fours all at once!

It is very rewarding to see children in that second year, as they reinforce their learning by teaching others. They feel more confident and outgoing and take responsibility for transitions and important tasks like cleaning up the room — "I know how to put the blocks away" — and immediately show three year old friends how to stack them on the shelf. Since children already know the teacher, the classroom, and the structure of the day, the fours enter the year as the "big guys on the block."

One teacher says it is “duck soup” the second year and “having the parent partnership for two years is an added bonus.”

### From an administrator’s point of view . . .

a mixed-age class is also helpful for enrollment slumps. One always strives to have a balance of numbers for each age, but there can be more flexibility in multi-age groups. If there is a shortage of a certain age, a few children of another age can be enrolled. At Riverfield, our preference is to have each family group in the room have some threes and some fours — preferably about half and half. With team teaching in every classroom, children can often be in the same room with a good friend, but not always in the same family group. This encourages them to make new friends and also to have some time with old ones; and it pleases the parents to have them in the room together.

At Riverfield Country Day School, the multi-age group does not stop at preschool. In fact, it is just getting started there. Other mixed ages are kindergarten and first, second and third, fourth and fifth, and sixth-seventh or seventh-eighth. Nationally, there is a growing interest in multi-age grouping for all ages, especially in the middle school, and we are happy to be among the pioneers in the field of multi-age education.

In one of our teacher’s college class, the professor asked his students what type of school they attended in grade school. When he realized several had attended one-room schoolhouses, where multi-age groups were the rule, he said, “Those are the people who learn how to think!” Isn’t that what it is all about?