

A Brief History of Public Education

Until the last century, the vast majority of people were educated in a tutorial context, meaning they were taught knowledge or a trade one-on-one or in a small group. In some learning centers, such as Paris, larger groups of students would gather to hear learned men read out of relatively scarce books, and the content would be discussed. Hence the English word "lecture" comes directly from the French word for "read." The teens attending these "universities" had normally already learned to read at home. The first universities in North America, such as Harvard, also took in students with no previous formal schooling.

All this changed radically as a result of the Industrial Revolution. For the first time in history, a large percentage of the general population was needed to work outside of their homes in factories. Initially, children were incorporated into this labor force, just as they had previously helped their families in farming or trades. However, use of children as a cheap source of labor became abusive outside of the family, with extremely long working hours and bad working conditions. Reformers began to call for child labor laws and schools (which would occupy and teach the children so that both parents could work in industry... important if wages were to be kept low).

The first modern-style public schools were really factory schools, paid for and run in the interests of industry, which did not want the children to be educated as scholars, but as future factory workers. They purposely herded the children into ever larger groups, systematically shutting down locally sponsored one-room schoolhouses, in order to ensure that the children would adjust to working in large factory-like groups. (All of this is meticulously documented in John Gatto's *Underground History of American Education*.)

From what we have observed, most modern-style public schools continue to arrange children into classes based on homogenous groupings of a single age or grade level. In contrast, multiage groupings are an education system where students in one class range in age by four or more years. The students study the same material simultaneously, with assignments tailored to each individual's ability level, learning style, and interest.

The modern system employed by the majority of American public schools today does not appear to be a prospering system, nor do the majority of children appear to flourish under its practices. Some students seem to be successful regardless of their educational environment because they are good at passive learning, or are naturally active learners; we wish to provide an environment where all students can experience success.

Some Benefits of Multiage Classrooms

- Students are contributing members rather than primarily passive learners, so they begin to take responsibility for their own learning. The result is a student-centered classroom (rather than teacher-centered) where independent thinkers and learners can develop and thrive.
- School becomes a place to grow and contribute, rather than being a place to go and perform.
- Multiage education produces independent learners, leadership skills and the initiative to reach out and help peers.
- Peer teaching and mentoring benefits both the teacher and the learner, and allows the teaching adult more time to give lessons to small groups of students or individuals.
- Relational skills and roles modeled in this family-type scenario are transferable to life outside the classroom.
- Cooperative or collaborative learning enables children to learn from the activities of other students in the group, so knowledge bases are increased exponentially.
- Students remain with the same peers and teachers for several years.
- Students learn to work more independently and become better problem solvers.
- Students gain self confidence and feel safe taking risks when pressure and competition is decreased.
- A heterogeneous grouping of students allows the classroom to function more like a family unit, with each member serving a unique role.
- Students get to know and understand diversity.
- Students are not limited to performing at their age level but rather to the best of their ability, this alleviates some anxiety caused by competition, and gives room for healthy personality development.
- Older children develop leadership and responsibility; they grow through being examples and models for younger children. Younger children are stimulated by the older ones in learning and behavior.
- Students needs are addressed individually.
- The education is flexible, thus adaptable to the changing world in which we live.
- Students learn to balance freedom with responsibility.
- The sense of community promotes (among other things) social development, cooperative learning, and problem solving.
- Students become active learners, and establish a strong knowledge base.
- Family relationships are strengthened rather than strained.