

# AMS POSITION PAPER

## *MULTI-AGE GROUPING*



### **Rationale:**

Educational theory and research indicate that learning is an individual process - in time frame, style, and interests - and that children learn from one another. (Hart, p.20; Healy, p. 283; and Gardner, p. 11). Even though most schools are organized by homogeneous, single-age grouping, research has not found this to be beneficial. Conversely, heterogeneous grouping, by ability and age, avoids identification of slow students, improves relationships between students, and facilitates the use of common learning objectives and expectations. It improves peer culture, resulting in peer instruction, peer modeling, and peer reinforcing. (Brookover, p. 11).

Montessori education theory supports multi-age grouping, and Montessori teachers have implemented it for over 100 years. This concept has recently moved into the mainstream due to the work of many educational theorists, researchers, and practitioners. Several states and early childhood organizations are recommending or requiring multi-age grouping in preschool and elementary settings.

### **Strategies for Implementation:**

While the success of multi-age grouping has been demonstrated, it is helpful to analyze specific methods and practices as a guide:

- Children learn from one another. This can be seen in family and play situations where children are free to observe and interact in a variety of activities. Young children learn higher level cognitive and social skills not only through mental development, but also by observing others as models.
- Multi-age grouping usually incorporates a three-year age span based on similarities in physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development.
- Children from birth to age 6 respond most positively to environments with concrete, sequential materials which help them interact with and learn about the limits and realities of their world.
- Six to twelve year olds are interested in the world around them, utilize a more complex cognitive style, and are highly social. The use of reason forms the basis for the development of imagination, which leads to a lifelong love of learning.
- For the twelve to eighteen year olds there are not key learning materials, but instead key experiences which enable the young adult to explore the world of human affairs, community, and culture. Interdependence (through interaction) supports the development of personality as well as exploration of ways that each can make contributions to the world.
- Each group of children remains together in the same environment and with the same teaching team for three years. Therefore, only one-third of the group is new each year, enabling children and teachers to get to know one another very well. This avoids the yearly stress children often face of new teachers, new rules, and new expectations. For the teachers, it offers the opportunity to know each child very well and follow each child's development over time, personalizing instruction.
- Multi-age grouping helps children develop a sense of community and supports social development. Older children act as models and (sometimes) teachers of younger children. This aids development of personality, collaboration, and cooperation. There is less anxious competition because all children are not expected to have identical skills and perform equally. This leads to respect for the individuality of each person in the group and recognition that each child has unique strengths and contributions to offer the group. Comparisons are not made, and cooperation is encouraged, thus accommodating the uneven development which is

especially evident in the birth to eight age range.

- Multi-age grouping encourages peer teaching, which helps the child both as teacher and learner. As groups are working, the adult teacher has time for individual or small group instruction.
- Children work at their own levels, which may vary in different curriculum areas. Groups are flexible and often differ, depending on interest, subject matter, and/or ability. children learn from the many activities within the environment and often find interest in the work of another child or group of children. Because they see the older children interacting successfully with the advanced curriculum, children don't develop fears of succeeding in higher grades.
- Collaborative learning is encouraged. This occurs not only when a teacher has formed a group for a specific lesson, but often happens without specific, assigned groups. Spontaneous grouping can occur when the teacher suggests that a child ask another for assistance. (Hart, p. 11).
- Curriculum and materials are multidimensional and concrete, especially for children from birth to age eight. Children re-explore the same materials at different levels. For example, a group of geometric solid figures can first be sensorially explored, then named, matched to others, duplicated using paper, pencil and scissors, and eventually explored mathematically and geometrically. This repetition aids in the true understanding and helps negate the current belief that a topic is studied, tested, then forgotten. The repetition also encourages children to assume responsibility for their own learning, makes them more self aware and thus able to see and correct their own errors.
- Multi-age grouping lends itself well to inclusion of children with special needs into classrooms with typically developing peers. The benefits of inclusion for all children have been demonstrated, and they range across all developmental and educational domains. (Esposito, 1987; Thompson, et, al. 1993).

#### References:

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The American Montessori Society (AMS) is a nonprofit education society founded in 1960 whose purpose is to help children develop their potential through the educational principles of Dr. Maria Montessori. This includes the following: developing Montessori programs, accrediting schools, granting credentials, encouraging research, organizing seminars and symposia, and promoting all other areas which relate to the dissemination of Montessori philosophy.

