

Teaching Outside the Box – Using non-traditional, multi-age learning environments in an early elementary setting

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Abstract

This paper is set within the context of my experiences as a multi-age classroom teacher, as well as a mother of three. I began my teaching career as a primary teacher, teaching Kindergarten through grade three. I was feeling my journey with my students was incomplete because as the school year ended so did our time together. During this time my own children were having very different school experiences themselves. One of my daughters is neuro divergent and learns in any environment, on her own and with minimal connection to peers or teachers. My other daughter struggles in a traditional classroom setting and needs a deep connection with her teacher. My son needs to be able to see relevance in his learning and be able to apply it to real life situations. I noticed that my three children's diversities were echoed in my classroom many times over and this inspired me to create a learning environment that met more of my students' needs. In this paper I argue the benefits of a multi-age learning environment guided by child-centered and place-based learning philosophies in an early elementary school setting. Evidence illustrates that holding students for multiple years and adding new students in the lower grades, allows for deeper connections and eases school year time constraints. An application is creating an environment where student choice is an integral part of the learning process including using multiple spaces around their community, this allows for student autonomy and ownership over their learning which develops leadership, collaboration skills life long academic success. I advocate for a multiage learning approach with child-centered and place-based philosophies to be used in early elementary settings and introduced in teacher education programs.

Keywords; child-centered learning, multiage classroom, place-based learning, alternative education program, connection, student choice, early elementary

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Chapter One: Introduction

In this chapter, I explain my interest in the topic of my Capstone paper and how this topic relates to my learning as a participant in the Master of Education program at Thompson Rivers University. Next, I explain my interest in multi-age environments governed by child-centered, place-based learning philosophies and the significance of this topic in local and provincial contexts. Lastly, I continue my argument and supporting evidence and finish by outlining how my paper will progress.

My Interest in Non-traditional Learning Environments

Education and the learning process has been a passion of mine for decades. It was not until my own three children were in school that I truly understood how diverse the process of learning could be. My eldest daughter struggled with school for most of her educational career. She did not thrive in a room with desks and fluorescent lights but needs wide open spaces and to be as close to nature as possible for her to be able to process any kind of curricular information. My youngest daughter is neuro divergent, has an eidetic memory and does her best learning on her own, at her own speed, with little or no teacher or peer involvement. She needs a limitless achievement ceiling, a fast-paced timeline and to be continually challenged. My son needs to be interested in and be able to apply his knowledge to his life to find success in learning. Reading a book or watching a video on small engine repair, then taking his newfound knowledge and applying it to real life situations is an example of how he thrives.

I realized I should be doing more to meet the needs of the students I teach. I took my own children's needs and began applying these ideals in my classroom. Soon after this time

of reflection and reinvention, I was given the opportunity to develop a multi-age program with a child-centered, place-based foundation. I then created the “BK WILD (Wilderness Integration Learning Design)” and have been using this format for four years.

My Journey to Education

My journey to becoming a master’s student was on the encouragement of a valued colleague. She suggested I do my master’s because I “was already doing a lot of work like it and why not see where it could take me”. This suggestion got me looking and I was drawn to the Thompson River’s program. My first foundational connection between my master’s learning and my job occurred in EDUC 5021 Philosophy and History of Education. This course helped me solidify my own philosophy around education, as well as instruct me on who these foundational beliefs first started with. To understand where these ideals came from was enriching, empowering and strengthened my interest and belief in multi-age, child-centered and place-based. EDUC 5041 Diversity: Constructing Social Realities was also instrumental in strengthening my resolve of the importance of these ideals. Understanding diversity allowed me to see ways that I could further alter my teaching so that the learning environments I presented to the students became more accessible for every student I work with. Lastly, EDUC 5031 Curriculum Teaching and Learning was my first attempt at applying nontraditional ideals to the curriculum requirements teachers work with in British Columbia. It was my first tiny step in what I believed to be a significant shift in direction for teachers and students.

Significance of Multi-age Learning Environments

This topic is significant because multi-age learning environments with a child-centered, place-based foundation, offer a multitude of ways for students of all ages and abilities to learn.

These types of alternative education make the entire process more authentic. This type of learning format provides the opportunity for students to personalize their learning journey. These environments offer ways for students to learn and share their knowledge in unique ways, while still allowing the teacher to present curricular requirements. Many kinds of learners, including those who are reluctant, students with diverse needs, as well as those who are neurotypical and divergent find success in a multi-age environment. Students learning in these environments develop strong ownership over their learning as well as the spaces they learn in. They develop powerful leadership skills and strengthen problem solving and critical thinking.

Teachers find that creating and teaching in these environments is a gratifying experience. They develop deep and meaningful relationships with their students and their student's families. The stress associated with the deadlines of a ten-month school year is less as they hold their students for multiple years. Teachers offer a wider range of places to learn and differing ways to do one activity which allows their students to find what works best for them. The skills their students learn and use in a multi-age environment are foundational and will remain with the students for their entire educational career and life.

Presenting the Argument

In this paper, I argue that using a multi-age, child-centered, place-based learning environment will strengthen self confidence, leadership, and problem-solving skills as well as authentic academic and social emotional learning in all students in early elementary grades. The first reason is that multi-age groupings allow for more time for connections to develop between students, teacher and family members. Nel Nodding believes that home is the first place where education begins and having a strong connection between home and school

strengthens the function of education (Smith, 2004, 2020). Multi-age classrooms also create a balance between age and ability which allows for enhanced social and emotional skills and reduces overall stress about academics (Song et al., 2009). Next, child- centred learning encourages students to have an active role in their learning. This allows learning to become authentic and important to each student as Maria Montessori believes (Marshall, 2017). Another reason is, place-based learning develops a sense of belonging, feeling of stewardship and responsibility of both rural and urban spaces around the school (Place-based Education Evaluation Collaborative, 2010). Curriculum based learning in the spaces around the school and in the local community creates strong bonds, appreciation, and commitment to the community (Sobel, 2013). Lastly as John Dewey believed that teachers have a responsibility to create an environment that fosters inquiry and exploration and encourages student autonomy, creativity and critical thinking (Main, 2023).

Overview of Paper

The second chapter of this paper follows this introduction and is a literature review investigating the benefits of multi-age, child-centered learning environments. A discussion of multi-age cohort grouping, place-based learning and child centred planning are the focal points for this section. In Chapter Three I share my experiences with my topic by sharing the program I created and continue to develop. I also discuss my vision for the future development of a workshop to encourage new and student teachers to consider using a multi-age, child-centered format in their classrooms. To conclude this paper, I will discuss the implications of multi-age, child-centered learning environments in classrooms in more schools across the province.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

In this chapter, I define terms that I use often throughout the literature review and paper. Next, I outline the themes of my argument and present the evidence from the literature. The themes are as follows: benefits of multi-age learning environments; positive aspects of a child-centered; and the reasons to develop a place-based learning belief system. This is followed by an explanation of the role of a teacher in a multi-age setting. The chapter ends with a summary.

Definition of Terms

Multi-age cohorts are often confused with multigrade cohorts. While both are like each other there are key differences. Multigrade is often created out of necessity, it is also known as a split grade classroom, where school enrollment dictates a combining of more than one grade in a classroom. A multi-age cohort is a philosophical choice (Ronksley-Pavia et al., 2019) that creates a community of students of differing ages and abilities that are grouped together without grade labels (Messer, 2000). The array of student learning needs in a multi-age classroom meld very well with a child-centred teaching philosophy. Also called student or learner centred, this is when the teacher provides the resources, sets the stage for appropriate and intellectual discussions by encouraging students to investigate their curiosities with peers and discover information for themselves. The teacher is the guide, rather the conductor in the learning process (Gonzales, 2014). Allowing students to take an active role in their learning will often shift learning away from textbooks and towards learning by doing which is found with the place-based learning idea. Place-based learning (PBL) is the process of using local spaces to teach curricular content with hands-on, experiential learning opportunities (Sobel, 2013).

Multi-age Learning Philosophy.

Multi-age class composition is not a new topic in education. Song et al. (2009) stated that at their inception multi-age classrooms were the norm and found in the one room schoolhouses that were scattered across America. At that time, the grouping was out of necessity and convenience, children of school age went to the closest school regardless of their age or grade. Currently, Messer (2000), noted that education has continued to embrace the philosophy in some schools across the United States of America, Canada and worldwide for reasons no longer than just necessity. Messer continued to state, multi-age was considered a rural school situation, again out of necessity, now however, multi-age is considered a possible option for rural or urban school settings alike. Educators that believe in the benefits of multi-age learning and teaching and are making the choice to use these ideas in their spaces.

The core philosophy of multi-age education is based on children's developmental diversity, and according to Bingham (1995), this diversity is celebrated and valued as the teacher embraces the diverse community of learning needs their classroom possesses. The following paragraphs outline some of the benefits of and some difficulties with using the multi-age philosophy in classrooms today.

Individualized learning.

A multi-age class, Bingham (1995) stated, is an intentional grouping of planned diversity. This practice allows for students to have an individualized experience where they are offered learning opportunities according to their needs, interests and strengths. Ronksley-Pavia et al. (2019) believed that using this type of practice in turn increases student contentment and happiness at school, which can result in less issues with problem behaviours.

Bingham (1995) explained that in a multi-age setting children with more diverse needs tend to stand out less because everyone is working at a different level with materials that work best for them, there are different tools and accommodations for anyone that would like or need them. Bingham's research also supported the idea that teachers are able to view their group with a broad spectrum of ability where everyone finds a spot that is uniquely theirs based on their specific strengths and stretches. From this spectrum a student can move freely as they progress and can participate as they are able to. For example, a student may begin the year by sitting quietly and observing, then move to a comfortable partnership and then a small group as their needs and strengths grow.

In their paper, Song et al. (2009) wrote that a multiage cohort is usually together for multiple years which not only creates a sense of continuity but erases the school year deadlines and allows students to continue their path to success when they are ready, not just because their time in their grade is over.

Strength of Relationships

A multiage classroom allows for deeper and continuous relationships between students, students and teachers and teachers and the families. Rowland (1999) wrote that the continuity of the same teacher, with the same teaching style and expectations allow for consistency of learning experiences and sets the stage for deeper more meaningful learning overall. This also allows the teacher and families the experience of watching learning happen over a longer period, creating a more detailed picture of the progress.

In her book, Bingham (1995) explained that a benefit of strong and genuine relationships is evident at the beginning of a new school year. In a straight grade setting the first few weeks

of school are spent building relationships, working on routines and learning expectations from each other. In a multi-age setting these relationships have already been forged by returning students and these students then model the expectations and routines for the new students joining the group. This means the first weeks of start up are smooth and less stressful in a multi-age setting.

Another foundational part of the multi-age philosophy is the element of care that is felt in all the relationships created in this type of group. Bergman (2004) explained how Nel Nodding believed in the importance of care in the moral development of children. One of the ways she believed teachers could illustrate their care is by modeling caring and expected behaviours to their students. Modeling is evident in many classrooms and in the multi-age group it is done extensively between teacher and student and as well as between students themselves.

Non academic Areas of Growth

Rowland (1999) expressed that another benefit to multi-age classrooms is the social and emotional growth that occurs in the class community. The students are constantly interacting with classmates of the same and different ages. They are learning from each other, helping each other polish skills in listening, empathy and how to offer and accept help. This paper stated that the multi-age class develops a feel of a family unit, because there is so much support and interaction. The notion that multi-age classes become like family is not uncommon, Bingham (1995) also suggested that the group functions much like a family in that the whole group supports one another's unique developmental path and accepts everyone for where they are in

that journey. It is noted in this paper that students in a multiage class are often more competent in areas like study habits, cooperation, self motivation and general feelings about school.

Sikander (2015) explained how the multiage grouping develops the non-academic skill growth that will help equip children with the social competence they require to be successful in society. Creating productive members of society is one part of John Dewey's philosophy of education.

Opposing views of Multi-age Learning

Ronksley-Pavia (2019) suggested that perception, time for professional development and tangible evidence of success are barriers to the multi-age ideology. Parental perception that their child will not get as good an education in a multi-age room for reasons such as their child is older and will have to babysit or supervise younger students instead of focusing on their own work, or their child is young and will be lost because they don't have as much experience at school. According to this research this is something teachers of multi-age classes need to address.

Song et al. (2009) surmised that there is not a lot of specific training about multi-age teaching available. Differentiation of the multi-age levels is daunting and worrisome to some teachers, according to this research, and teachers do not believe they have the skillset to deal with the multi-age expectations.

The research by Song et al. (2009) went on to explain that administrators are concerned about meeting the accountability standards of their school boards. They need to know all classes in their school are meeting the requirements and the multi-age classrooms do not have

grade specific learning or standardized tests. Song et al. went on to suggest it is difficult to fit the multi-age classrooms into the traditional organization of most schools.

Place-based Learning

Place-based learning (PBL) fits the multi-age philosophy in that PBL allows the teacher to offer a literal world of learning spaces which is supported by Sobel (2013) who wrote that for students to experience rich and meaningful learning teachers need to find a way to link the classroom to the local area outside the school walls. PBL uses local, community spaces and natural environments to help teach core concepts from subjects across the curriculum. Sikander (2015) supported this idea and draws upon Dewey's ideas by expressing that students need to be personally connected to their learning spaces to find a meaningful purpose to create lifelong learning. Iqbal (2019) reiterated these same ideals that real world application of learning, with hands on experiences increases student interest, which in turn improves overall achievement.

Sobel (2013) also mentioned that in addition to the academic results students also develop strong ties to their local spaces and a personal appreciation for the natural world outside their classroom which leads to a commitment to become a caring, active citizen of their own community. PLB exposes students to issues concerning the places around them in a way that is understandable and real to them. Elbaz (2023) supported Sobel's ideas and stated that through exploring the topics in the curriculum, teachers help identify issues that concern the students and then encourage and practice problem solving skills to work out real solutions. The students become the problem solvers and step towards being active society members rather than passive observers.

There are downfalls to the place-based learning ideal. A recent study by Yemini (2023) noted that PBL is still considered unconventional and innovative in many places. When implemented in a school PBL could be seen as controversial because it disrupts the traditional role of school and teaching. Yemini explained that there is a level of discomfort and disbelief among some educators, that learning outside of the classroom is as effective as regular settings. This research also suggested that another downfall is that it takes time to develop and prepare a place-based learning philosophy. Teachers need to practice and polish these foundational ideals and time moves quickly during the school year, which makes professional development of this type difficult to attain.

Child-centered learning

When contemplating the idea of multi-age learning one thinks about the student as the core of the idea. Sikander (2015) noted that child or student-centered learning melds into the multi-age classroom because both are about students having an active and genuine role in their learning and being at the center of the learning-teaching process. Naimanova's (2023) paper suggested that the child or student-centered approach encourages lifelong learning, self-discipline and creativity in all students. Rosenbusch (1985) explained that child-centred learning takes the stages of a child's development into consideration and works within those specific parameters. Rosenbusch explained further that children are naturally curious and involve their entire body in their explorations and learning. They want to move and touch and experience learning firsthand which is encouraged in a child-centered space.

Child-centered learning is a constructivist view of education where the student is involved in every stage of the learning process. Sikander (2015) explained that it is designed to

support every student in individual and authentic ways according to unique strengths and stretches. Sikander goes on to suggest that the curriculum should not be imposed on the student, but the student should have voice and the right to make decisions about their education. Akdemir and Ozcelik's (2019) paper mentioned that the learning approaches often used in child-centred learning spaces are also key approaches in multi-age learning, such as inquiry based, cooperative, peer instruction and team-based learning. These approaches support the idea that students need to produce information rather than consume it.

While there are many positive aspects to a child-centered approach there are some difficult aspects as well as noted by Akdemir and Ozcelik (2019). They stated that classroom management looks different in a child-centered classroom. Child-centered spaces are often loud due to conversations on going throughout the day. Behavioural issues could occur due to a student feeling helpless and not knowing where to get help or a student not accepting the expectations of responsibility for themselves or owning behaviours. Rosenbusch (1985) furthered this idea of difficult management by suggesting that elementary school students are often still driven by their need to move their bodies, they cannot sit still for long periods of time. In a child-centered space they are able to move when needed and can use different seating options than the ones found in typical classroom settings. Rosenbusch suggested that quiet and still does not happen often in a child-centred space and for some students and teachers a child-centered space will not work for them and they may find what they need in a teacher-lead class.

Requirements of the Teacher

The idea of multi-age learning is made stronger with child-centered, place-based ideology intertwined throughout. The piece of the picture yet to be discussed is the teacher

whose beliefs and experience pull all the parts together. Elbaz (2023) explained that the teacher needs to create the environment that is strong enough to include fascinating and exciting fieldtrips, projects and experiences outside the walls of the classroom, and yet be gentle and kind enough to allow the quietest and shy students to feel seen, valued and included.

Naimanova (2023) added that the teacher needs to be able to communicate with all students about their experiences and help them translate these experiences to meaningful learning. This learning needs to cover curricular requirements for more than one curriculum but still differentiated in order to meet the multiple needs of those same students. The teacher needs to be familiar with child development, according to Christensen (1992) and flexible with management expectations. Messer (2000) concluded that the multi-age teacher is the invisible facilitator of real life, genuine learning to the students they work with.

Summary

The topic of multi-age, child-centered, place-based learning has been discussed in the literature. There seems to be a gap in relevant research around this topic. There are several papers from over twenty years ago and then a number from less than four years ago. There is still a lot of area to cover on the topic of multi-age teaching and learning, but the research is sound and more will follow. The literature reviewed in the above pages explains the reasons why multi-age teaching with child-centered and place-based philosophies is beneficial to learners and appealing to some teachers. There are difficulties associated with the same, however, with time and patience these difficulties can be remedied. In the next section of this paper, I will illustrate my personal application of the argument that multi-age, child-centered, place-based

learning is beneficial to all students in their curricular learning as well as social emotional development.

Chapter Three: Application

In this chapter I discuss the practical application of my argument in my role of a non-traditional, multi-age classroom teacher at my semi-rural school in the West Kootenays of British Columbia. I draw from my experiences from implementing and teaching in a multi-age (MA), child-centered, place-based learning (PBL) program the BK WILD (Wilderness Integration Learning Design). I explore the effects of child-centered, place-based learning on the motivation, social emotional, leadership and problem-solving skills of the multi-age students in the WILD program. Next, I summarize how my experiences connect to the literature and argument that a multi-age environment with child-centered, place-based ideology is beneficial to many types of learners. I conclude by explaining my plan to share these ideals with teachers and teacher candidates in my local school districts and ultimately the rest of British Columbia.

Experiences with MA, child-centered, PBL environments

In 2016, the government of British Columbia rolled out its “new” curriculum for kindergarten to grade nine. I was teaching in my first classroom and was excited about the curriculum change because it aligned with my value system and educational philosophy. The new curriculum was created to have students be more involved in their learning and to develop skills like problem solving, deep thinking and lifelong learning (Government of British Columbia, 2024). I was teaching a grade one, grade two split but used some of the philosophies of multi-age, child-centered, place-based learning in the room. My students were between the ages of five and eight years old and had a vast array of skills and abilities that ranged from below kindergarten level to intermediate grades. I focused on what they could do, and we moved through the year with great success. I used the same philosophy with my next class which was

kindergarten and when I moved schools, I had a kindergarten and grade one class. I had seen how child-centered, place-based learning worked for students. A favourite example of this is taking our math lesson outside to skip count on chalk lily pads. The students had drawn the lily pads and printed their skip counting onto them. We then hopped like frogs and ribbited our numbers out over the different lily pad pathways. We chose lily pads because we noticed the lilies blooming on our neighbourhood walk that morning. The students were engaged in their learning, connecting to their community and participated as they could. Some drew the lily pads and others printed the numbers or said the numbers or just hopped with the group. The largest frustration I had during this period was that my time with my students was over too quickly. With the help of my administrator, we constructed a plan to hold onto my students longer. I was given the go ahead to create a multiage program.

The context

I was given the opportunity to build a multi-age program in early 2020. I worked with my administrator, and we presented the idea to the rest of the school staff and to the school district. My motivation and project proposal came from a frustrated discussion I had with my administrator a short time before. I felt rushed and like I was pushing my students to places they were academically not ready for. I felt like their results were only memorization and that they were not actually internalizing or connecting with the activities. I suggested keeping the students I felt needed extra time with me and add new students to the group at the beginning of the school year. My administration supported this, and the multiage idea was born. We presented this idea to staff and to the school district and were given the green light, with the addendum that we run two classrooms with two teachers to make it happen in our school.

The BK WILD program started September 2020 under full pandemic restrictions, a pair of team teachers and forty students. In June 2024 we completed our fourth year together and the benefits to the students have been as we hoped; natural progression, ownership over learning outcomes and quality of work as well as strong leadership development for every student. An example of this is when we accept student work, we ask the question “Is this your best effort today?”, students take a few moments to answer either yes, it is their best for today or no that they should go and make it stronger. We as teachers support their decision or suggest a different choice if we feel the student is not being honest in their decision. Students can then go back and self edit, buddy edit or ask for adult consultation to find ways to make their assignment stronger, sometimes we see a student has done what they can for the situation and accept their work as is. Students have WILD buddies and “good fit” people they know are positive choices to work with. This example is evidence that supports the argument multi-age, child-centered, place-based learning environments support students becoming strong self advocates, creative problem solvers, and develop pride and connection to their cohort and learning spaces.

Building B.K. W.I.L.D.

The first step in the creation of the WILD program was to fill it with students. There was no screening process instead we had parent information sessions. This was so families understood what the vision for the WILD program is. From there their name was added to a list of interested families so when it came time to place students, we had parental consent. We wanted parents to understand the major difference between BK WILD and mainstream schooling is the timeline; we intend to keep students in the program for the duration of their

primary years. We strive to build a community of students of differing ages and abilities that would work together without grade level labels, as Messer (2000) stated. It was my philosophical choice to create a multiage cohort as Ronksley-Pavia et al. (2019) noted and miraculously enough my teaching partner's philosophies were on point with mine.

I had been teaching at Brent Kennedy (BK) for over a year and a half when this opportunity arose. During this time, I made many strong, caring relationships with families and the children of these families were the first ones placed in the program due to these preexisting relationships. I wanted the element of care to be evident every day from the first day forward. Like Bergman (2004) explains Nel Nodding's philosophy of care, the modeling of caring behaviour would be present from the start, being modeled by teachers and students as well as we welcomed the new students every year in September. My teaching partner and I started the first year with forty students between the ages of five and nine years old.

Multiage in a split grade school. When I first proposed the multi-age classroom I was drawn to the idealized idea, explained by Song et al. (2009), of a classroom where every student could work at their own pace to achieve their full potential. I hoped for a place students loved to come to and felt empowered to take steps towards leadership within the class community and eventually to the school and greater community as well. We started our first year of the BK WILD under COVID restrictions and in hindsight, this turned out to be a gift. We had to create cohorts of two classes, which were predetermined by our district requirements for the program. We had to stay together for recess breaks, so our students were together for all aspects of their school day. We gelled as a cohesive unit very quickly. We were together for eighty percent of our day, and we noticed that by November the grade/age lines were diminishing, everyone

played and worked with everyone, there were no big kids or little kids, just classmates. We had created a family feel that Bingham (1995) wrote about in her book.

Throughout the next three years of the WILD program the multi-age ideology got stronger and more common place with our students. They stopped worrying about what grade they were in and had become a “Multiager”. Our second September together made the benefits of multi-age very clear. We were hearing from our families about how smooth the end of the summer was and how easy the beginning of the school year had been. We knew the continuity that Rowland (1999) wrote about was supporting our families as they transitioned back to school. Students knew which classroom they were going to, who would be teaching them and who most of their classmates would be. One of our parents let us know how different start up was for her family prior to her children being in the program. She explained that the current year had been stress free and full of excitement, rather than anxiety and worry. She went on to say that this was the first year her boys had slept properly for the days prior to school starting. She was not the only parent to comment on the ease of the second year start up. These parent communications support my argument that these kind of learning environments are beneficial to students and families because the continuity lowers stress related to school.

Year Three and Four had similar moments of success. As teachers, my colleague and I noticed how quickly we got into the academic side of the new school year. Prior to teaching in the WILD program, we both agreed that the first four, up to six weeks of the new year was spent working on routines, expectations and getting to know each other as a class community. Because of the foundations of the program, we were ready to start academics by the second

week of school because we had settled into routines and expectations so fast. An example of this readiness was when we took all forty students on a day long fieldtrip during the second week of year three. In our fourth year we took them on a fieldtrip on the Friday of the first week. This is more evidence to support the argument that non-traditional multi-age ideals are beneficial because more time can be focused on curricular learning sooner in the school year.

Another example and support for my argument for the benefits of the multi-age setting is that every student in the group was able to participate in some way in every activity and project we did. Both Bingham (1995) and Ronksley-Pavia et al. (2019) spoke to this idea that even students with diverse needs will find success. WILD students understand that everyone learns in a unique fashion on their own timeline and therefore everyone can do and participate as best they can in all activities. For example, we did a Canadian predator inquiry project in the fall. Some of our students were not writing confidently yet, and others were not yet very strong readers, however, they completed the project along side our strongest students. The stronger students used writing and higher leveled books to find their information, then shared their learning by writing paragraphs or making a slide show on the computers. They then shared their information with the less confident learners and at the same time these less confident learners used videos and picture books to gather the information they needed. They then used sentences or art to share their learning. Everyone was successful and everyone had a uniquely completed project they were proud of.

Learning outside the classroom (PBL). Having started the program during the pandemic we were encouraged to take our students outside as often as possible. We committed an entire day, WILD Wednesday, to outdoor, place-based learning. Sobel (2013) and Sikander (2015) both

mentioned how important linking the classroom to the local spaces is for student success. The students need to have a personal connection to the spaces beyond the classroom to experience lifelong learning. This idea is echoed by Iqbal (2019) who stated that students need hands on, experiential learning to find enthusiasm and interest in their learning. This in turn will boost their connection and achievement levels. Students with personal connections to issues related to their space will be more interested in solving the issues. The space is real and important to each student and therefore so are the issues. This is the first step in students becoming lifelong learners, a phrase John Dewey coined (Soble, 2013), as well as becoming active participants in society rather than just observers as Elbaz (2023) remarked.

Our school location experiences all four seasons of the year and as such, we decided early on that we needed a sheltered gathering place outside the classroom. We found a space on our school grounds, and named it “The Nest”, this is where we start and end all our outdoor days. At first it was a covered space thanks to tarps and creative rope work and then a donated carport frame with tarps kept the rain and snow off us. We noticed that after a few weeks our students were quite protective of their nest and the forest around it. They took it personally when they found litter or damage done to their area. This was our first problem to solve and another example that supports the argument that the using multi-age learning with a PBL foundation will strengthen advocacy, problem solving and stewardship skills for all students.

We had a “campfire”, which is our name for gathering time and brainstormed the problem and possible solutions. The students came up with reasons for the litter and damage. Such things like trash falling out of a pocket, not enough trash cans out in the forest, trash blown in from somewhere else. Any damage they felt was accidental because “the non-wilders

don't know the trees like us, they don't understand that they need to treat them kindly". We then came up with solutions which involved asking a supervisor to bring a trash bag out during recess, so kids had a place to put garbage and some WILD students created posters asking students to leave garbage inside or in a zipped-up pocket. Regarding the damage, a group of students wanted to create a short presentation about the trees and how the damage to them needs to be addressed. They then went to the other classrooms in our school and made the presentations. They explained that the trees are alive, and damage weakens their resistance to bugs and disease. They also mentioned the benefits of having acres of forest to play and learn in and what it could be if the trees disappeared. With this experience we saw students working together to solve an issue that was real and personal. They practiced leadership and stewardship skills and they accepted everyone did what they could within their comfort levels.

Child-centered learning. I did my teacher training in 1999 with UBC's WKTEP (West Kootenay Teacher Education Program). When I graduated in 2000, we had heard the whisper of a "new" ideal that was starting to make its way into the education system in Canada. We had an hour-long lecture on a classroom in BC that was doing things differently, the students were making decisions about their learning. This was my first introduction to child-centered or student-centered learning. I was intrigued and was drawn to this style of teaching, which was contradictory to the way I had just spent a year practicing with my classmates. The next time I experienced child centered learning was years later when I was awarded my first classroom. A colleague was teaching in this way next door to me. I saw what Sikander (2015) described as children being the center of the learning process, participating in an active and genuine role in what happened in the classroom. I saw this teacher taking her students' developmental

abilities into account with the vast options of choices she offered them for their many activities. For example, during a letter formation lesson she had different tools to use, big pencils, small pencils, pencils with grippers, triangle pencils – there was also different types and colors of paper and size of lines to print on. Her students were excited and engaged in their learning and each one of them was finding success with the activity.

I wanted this for my students. I then planned my activities for my students with their natural curiosity and abilities in mind. I wanted them to learn with wonderment and hands on experiences, as Rosenbusch (1985) suggests. When I moved schools, I used a similar philosophy until the BK WILD was created when I truly witnessed and experienced the benefits of child-centered learning. The first month of year one was spent solidifying relationships and making plans. We had a group “brain dump” about the different topics the students were interested in and then spent time cross referencing them to the curriculum. We kept the brain dump poster and every time we started a new topic the students would find it on the poster. We’ve done this every year since and it has become a favourite activity, we now add names to the suggestions. This activity encourages ownership over our learning and the students love connecting names to subjects. Sikander (2015) suggested that the curriculum should not be imposed on students, but they should be able to make choices involving what and how they learn. The beginning of the year brain dump allows students to feel heard and understand that everyone’s choice is considered, however, we may not get to study everyone’s suggestions in one year. Most know, however, that they will have another opportunity the next year in BK WILD and this links back to the idea of the benefit of continuity Rowland (1999) speaks of.

Speed Bumps

Trying to fit a multiage, child-centered, place-based learning environment into a traditional school has been exciting, rewarding and challenging as we encountered some speed bumps along the road to change. We call any moment of difficulty a speed bump in the WILD program, because it is not stopping forward movement, just slowing it down. Much like the research suggests in the paper written by Song et al. (2009), there is not a lot of professional development around multiage learning, child/student centered learning, or place-based learning. Evidence of an example of a speed bump regarding professional development on this topic is that my teacher partner and I spend a lot of time researching ideas and ways to make this collection of powerful ideologies work for us and our students. The biggest hurdle we have encountered regarding multiage is the requirements for reporting. The government requires we report on grade level achievement which is difficult in a space with no grade labels. Another example of a speed bump, which is stated in my argument, is the perception of our program by some of our colleagues. We have found there are two streams of thought; the first is mentioned in Yemini's (2023) paper and are people that find our program unconventional, almost controversial and are not willing to hear or see the benefits we are experiencing with our students. The second stream of people are the ones that are supportive, but do not want to know anymore about it and only see the management issues that Akdemir and Ozcelik (2019) and Rosenbauch (1985) spoke to in their research. They see the wiggling, and noise that comes from this kind of environment and not the engagement that is present at the same time. It is a goal of mine to build capacity among other educators to see the magic that this kind of learning space can create.

The Role of the Teacher

Committing to the multiage, child-centered, place-based learning model was a leap of faith. Thankfully, I am firm in my philosophy and worked with another amazing educator that is just as enthusiastic about the possibilities of the BK WILD program as I am. Together we have created and continue to develop this program. Just as the research by Messer (2000) and Elbaz (2023) states, we have created and become the facilitators of a space where deep, engaging, real, lifelong learning happens for students between the ages of five to ten years old. Our strongest evidence of this is the supportive communication we have with our students and their families. We know they love coming to school and are excited about their learning because they tell us so on a regular basis.

The Next Steps

The plan for the BK WILD program is to continue as a multiage, child-centered, place-based learning environment. For the 2024/2025 year my class enrollment will be twenty-four, five- to nine-year-olds. Due to a drop in school enrollment, there is no longer the opportunity for team teaching which means a drastic change for the WILD program. This is another speed bump. The future for the WILD at the school is solid, I am going to carry on and be an ambassador for multiage learning and all it entails. My organized plan is to currently focus on early primary and beginning intermediate students. In the future I aspire to have a minimum of three teachers teaching our program so we can increase our program to reach kindergarten through to grade six working together as a cohesive unit

Beyond the school. It is important to me to spread the word about what we are doing in the BK WILD. I plan on developing a short workshop about the benefits of creating a multi-age,

child-centered, place-based learning environment. The workshop will tell the story and reasons behind the BK WILD and then have a series of “How To...” video presentations for teachers to watch and then have handouts to refer to and take home with them as well as letting them know about my blog spot, which will offer more tools to refer to.

The workshop. The objective behind the workshop is to educate teachers and teacher candidates about what multi-age learning is, the benefits to students and what it could look like in their classroom. I would start the workshop with a brain dump of what the participants, know, think and wonder about multi-age learning. Everyone would have their own KTW page and then we’d share out. This will guide our learning for the day, I will then circle the questions that I have videos for and leave the rest for the question period at the end of the time. After this I will tell the story of BK WILD, with photo presentations as well as examples of students’ work.

We will then refer to the wonder section of the brain dump and start answering questions – with video examples and related pages. Videos will be on subjects like, building connections with families, communicating graded learning expectations in a nongraded cohort, numeracy with five to nine years old, taking all learning outside, the buddy system and getting started to list a few. I anticipate the topics will increase as time goes on and we will likely not be able to see all the videos in the workshop, but they will be posted on my blog site. We will make time at the end for any questions left unanswered then go back to the know and think part of our brain dump and discuss any reflections or changes of mind there may have been. I plan on offering this workshop to our local teacher training program as well our district to begin with. I would like to offer it at the provincial primary teacher’s conference as well.

Summary

In summary, my experience developing and teaching in the BK WILD program has allowed me to solidify my belief in the benefits, as represented in the literature, of a multi-age, child-centered, place-based learning environment. I have witnessed the development of deep connections within our class community, and a family feel in my classroom. I have seen students of all abilities find great success in their activities and have felt the love for their learning. I have heard a child of six offer kind words to a child of eight who was struggling with writing and reminding them that everyone learns at their own speed in their own time. I have felt the anger and disappointment of the group when their learning space was damaged and encouraged them to take their energy and transform it into a solution to the problem. I have heard the families of my students explain their gratitude for a peaceful and stress-free start to the school year. Finally, I have felt the pride and fulfillment of knowing that I am offering the best space for every student in my care to thrive and develop a lifelong love of learning. It is evident that more educators need to consider using the ideologies of multi-age, child-centered and place-based learning in their practices as outlined in this paper. I plan to share my experience with as many educators as possible by offering professional development opportunities, adding to my blog space and continuing to teach in this manner. In the final chapter, I will summarize the previous chapters and will explain the implications of my argument on a local and provincial level.

Chapter Four: Conclusion

In this paper, I argue that using a child-centered, place-based learning philosophy in a multi-age classroom will strengthen social emotional skills which in turn creates authentic and personalized academic results for all primary learners. Students will develop skills such as effective communication, creating and maintaining relationships, self awareness and goal setting. I make this argument because I have experienced the positive impact on a learner when they are supported and encouraged to learn at their own speed in their own way. In this chapter, I illustrate how the ideas and claims from the first three chapters are connected. I then explain the success of the argument in this paper and end by defining the practical and theoretical implications of this paper's findings.

Summary

In the first chapter, I explained how my interest in alternative learning environments evolved from my observations of the diverse learning needs of my own children. I then discussed how these revelations translated to the needs of the students in my classroom. Next, I explained how becoming a Master of Education Student increased the depth of my understanding of multi-age, child-centered and place-based learning philosophies. I go on to illustrate how being in the master's program strengthened my motivation to use these ideologies in my own practice as well as take steps to make the change I feel necessary to improve educational experiences for all students. The last part of the chapter connected how my personal experience and interests support the argument that multi-age grouping with a child-centered and place-based learning philosophy is beneficial to all learners.

In the second chapter, I connected my argument to the existing literature about multi-age, child-centered and place-based learning. The themes I explored with the existing literature are benefits of each ideology and how one works with the others. The literature illustrates benefits such as students experiencing less stress about school because there is a more relaxed timeline for mastery of skills (Bingham, 1995), a natural increase in leadership development as well as improving communication skills (Sikander, 2015) all while being engaged and uniquely successful in their academics (Song et al., 2009). I also connected to the literature that stated some of the difficulties (speed bumps) associated with using and developing alternative learning environments such as these. The literature review also outlined that difficulties stem largely from a lack of support and time for professional development for educators interested in teaching this way (Ronksley & Pavia, 2019) as well as school leadership struggling with trying to make non-traditional learning fit into the structure of traditional schools (Song et al. 2009). The literature examined in the second chapter supported my argument that multi-age, child-centered, place-based learning is beneficial for all learners and that for these benefits to be more vastly felt, more support for interested educators is required.

In the third chapter, I address how my teaching and development of the BK WILD program connected to the literature in Chapter Two through the practical application of using child-centered and place-base learning ideologies in a multi-age classroom setting. I shared my experiences of developing learning spaces that students connect to and are comfortable in while presenting activities that met more of their needs, more of the time in comparison to what I was doing prior. I explained that many of the benefits outlined in Chapter Two had been witnessed in my program throughout the fours years of its existence. I witnessed students

gaining self confidence in all aspects of their school day, taking responsibility for and pride in their learning, advocating for their needs and the needs of their classmates. I saw returning students supporting and working with new students to learn classroom expectations. I found student engagement and excitement over every activity increasing with time as well as a deep connection and stewardship towards all the different learning spaces we utilized. I had parents share their gratitude and enthusiasm with me over the fact that their children were excited and relaxed about school and learning. I experienced a sense of family and connection that got stronger every year as the grade labeling faded away to nothing and we had become a group of “multiager” students, teachers and families. Lastly, I explained that I had seen all students in the BK WILD, regardless of their diversity of needs, find authentic and personal success at school. They had gotten what they needed, when and how they needed it because of the multi-age, child-centered, place-based learning environment in which we learned. I was able to make many clear connections to the literature from these experiences that outlined the benefits of these kinds of learning philosophies.

Implications

This paper holds both theoretical and practical implications that should be considered by educators, administrators, school districts, teacher education programs and the Ministry of Education. Meeting the diverse needs of the many students in their classrooms is one of the key responsibilities every educator accepts. Using a multi-age, child-centered, place-based philosophy is a pedagogical practice that can fulfill this responsibility. While using non-traditional ideologies can be unnerving, the evolution of the learning process in these environments is rich, meaningful and personal for each student. Removing grade labels allows

every student to do what works best for them, regardless of their grade level expectations. Involving students in what and how they learn develops self advocacy skills. Changing the spaces that students learn in encourages stewardship and steps towards being an involved citizen. More research in the areas of alternative education, specifically in child-centered, PBL and how both work within a multi-age framework is needed to highlight this kind of teaching and learning to more educators and teacher candidates. More research and celebration of educators using these philosophies will ensure that their benefits become widespread in the field of education.

In the practical sense I would like for this paper to inspire other educators to try alternative ideologies in one or multiple ways. I would like administrators to gain understanding of what a multi-age classroom could like in their schools and ways they can support and encourage their staff to try these philosophies. There are many steps involved in making adaptations to a school to help an alternative learning program fit. However, the rewards to the students, families and teachers outweigh the risks many times over.

For a vast change such as this to take place, alternative education environments such as those including multi-age, child-centered and place-based models, need to become more common place. For this to happen there needs to be a large influx of interest and financial support from the provincial government. School districts would then in turn support their administrators and school leaders to spend time researching and working towards implementation in their school. This would encourage teachers to consider using these philosophies. The change needs to expand to future teachers as well. Teacher Education Programs across the province will need to support and encourage their teacher candidates to

consider using these ideologies as they start their career paths. There needs to be extensive support and an extended timeline for this change to occur. Teachers need to be equipped with the skills required to develop a deep understanding of the benefits of these pedagogical practices. Believing in the benefits for the students in their classrooms will strengthen their commitment to the change needed. When teachers can connect the new ideals to their already existing philosophies and have a clear pathway to the development of these ideals, they will be more likely to implement them in their learning spaces. When teachers feel supported and valued for the risks they are taking by trying an alternative approach, they will continue to strengthen their abilities and collaborate with more staff members. These are the first steps to systemic change. If successful this means that any student in the public education system could have an educational experience that is powerful, unique and will set them up for a successful future as a confident, active member of society.

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