Combined Grades in Waldorf Schools: Creating Classrooms Teachers Can Feel Good About

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Introduction

In Waldorf schools, combining grades is a concession, not a design choice. Low or decreased enrollment is often the cause for combining grades. Lower birthrates, limited population, geography, economy, and attrition can lead to decreased enrollment. Regardless of the causes, however, a school may continue a given class for many reasons, including responsibility for and loyalty to students and parents.

This study, a look at combined grades classrooms in Waldorf schools, necessarily takes into account that Rudolf Steiner's indications for teaching were made regarding an educational system of age-based grade levels and that most Waldorf schools are designed on this principle. Thus, most of the educational literature available on the topic is not based in the literature of Waldorf education. I used educational literature, interviews with teachers, questionnaires, and classroom observation to gain an improved understanding of combined grade classrooms both in general and specifically with regard to using Steiner's educational ideas in circumstances that differ from those in which the first Waldorf schools took root.

I contacted schools known to have combined grades or multiage classes and individuals who had relevant teaching experience. I interviewed eleven Waldorf school teachers and four Montessori school teachers; another four Waldorf school teachers provided questionnaire responses. I also interviewed one Montessori and two Waldorf school administrators and observed six combined grades classrooms in Waldorf schools and four Montessori multiage classrooms. All of the Waldorf teachers interviewed for this study considered their classrooms to be "combined grades." The four Montessori teachers advocate the "multiage" approach based on their own work and on established standards for Montessori schools. It is interesting to note that two of the teachers from the Montessori schools had backgrounds in Waldorf education—one was formally trained as a Waldorf teacher and another was a Waldorf school graduate.

Teaching Children of Different Ages in One Classroom

> Considering that Steiner made such efforts to free the language teaching from the fixed age groups—and the various passages of the published notes on the meetings (the Conferences (#4)) bear witness to this fact—and that he later dropped this question altogether and did not even mention it when the curriculum for modern languages was being discussed on 2nd June 1924 makes one strongly suggest that this problem should be taken up again anew.
>
> (Stockmeyer, 1991)

As an alternative to the now-pervasive standard of a grade-by-grade curriculum that was introduced to North America in the mid-19th century, students of different grade levels may be found in a single class. Although the concepts vary by name and detail, for clarity here the terms combined grades and multiage classrooms will be used to discuss two generally distinct approaches to teaching children of differing ages in one classroom. The reasons for assigning these students to a single class and the measures of educational achievement are distinguishing features of these approaches.

Grades are often combined because of administrative, enrollment, or economic constraints. Combined grades classrooms serve students who are in the same classroom but who receive curriculum at grade level, with two or more curricula taught in one classroom. Although teachers have personal intentions for the overall health of their classrooms, graded curriculum objectives have become increasingly focused on academic achievement. By contrast, multiage classrooms grow from a pedagogical foundation and have a broader view of educational success. To serve students in a multiage classroom, the teacher does not teach based on grade level. Instead, some of the priorities of a multiage classroom, based on my research, are these:

- To use developmentally appropriate practices and support the learning continuum.
- To develop the whole child and help children enjoy learning.
- To use the process approach to learning and build on each child's successes.
- To use varied instructional strategies within an integrated curriculum.
- To choose a curriculum based on interest and need.
- To develop individual potentialities to the maximum.
- To evaluate each learner on past achievements and individual potential.
- To encourage noncompetitive, cooperative social interaction.
- To establish one teacher for several years.
- To promote professional parent partnerships.

Much of what is done in Waldorf schools is consistent with what is described as "best practices" in the multiage setting. This work, ideally, avoids unhealthy competition among learners in favor of cooperation and support, acknowledges differing perspectives as natural and normal, fosters imitative learning, and aims to create risk-friendly environments that encourage exploration, experimentation, and problem solving. Sandra Stone (1996) compares the primarily academic focus of contemporary single grade education with multiage pedagogy when she states that "social, emotional, and moral learning are just as important as learning how to read."

Both multi-grade structures and Waldorf schools use methods that reflect a "constructivist" philosophy, meaning that knowledge is built through the work of teachers and students, rather than merely transmitted by teachers and absorbed by students. To this end, a progression leads children to discovery. According to Alfie Kohn (1999), "We form beliefs, build theories, make order. We act on the environment rather than responding to it—we do it naturally and continually. It's part of who we are." Teacher observations, involvement, and inspiration are required to create conditions for student discovery. The goal of allowing freedom to discover recognizes the motivational value of trust in the classroom, and, rather than a grading system, close observation of the student and authentic assessment are practiced in order to offer personal and creative leadership.

What Do Studies Say?

> The results of available studies generally indicate that on achievement tests students perform just as well or even better than those in single-grade classes. (Gayfer, 1991)

Studies looking at affective indicators of student success abound, and these often specify both individual and group benefits. Being in a more age-diverse social group allows for more varied and natural associations that help children within and outside of school. Nevertheless, in our increasingly literate and educated society, cognitive development tends to take priority, so whether or not such classrooms promote academic success is a crucial question. Do multiage or combined grades classrooms promote academic success? The answer is overwhelmingly "yes." In one study of 4,407 students, Joel Gajadharsingh (in Gayfer, 1991) found that "achievement of multi-grade students was significantly higher in vocabulary, reading, mathematics problem-solving and mathematics total." In a smaller study of 418 students, researchers concluded that "there is an 80% chance that the achievement of multi-grade students is equal or superior to that of students in single grades." (Gayfer, 1991)

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Obstacles to Combined Grades Classes: Cultural Conceptions

Despite studies that demonstrate that multiage and combined grades classrooms are good for students, unfortunately parents, teachers, and administrators tend to oppose them. The concept of combining grades has negative connotations for many people, and this attitude extends to multiage classrooms as well. Some reject these as throwback to the one-room schoolhouse, as antithetical to progress, or out of concern that they will not meet grade-by-grade curriculum standards.

A Canadian study includes research on attitudes about combined grades classrooms:

> Even though students in multi-grade classes do as well as, and in some cases better than, students in single grade classes, the parents and teachers do not accept this fact. A further implication is that parents and teachers had not received any positive statements about multi-grading, and that most publicity was negative, inaccurate, or misleading. (Gayfer, 1991)

Sometimes this negative view is overcome through education about and marketing of a program. Montessori education has carved out a place for itself among those seeking alternative education despite three-year student age ranges in each of the elementary, middle, and upper school classrooms. According to the Association of Montessori Internationale website, there are 170 affiliated schools in the U.S. Private schools tend to be seen as elite and, through careful representation of their benefits, able to create a strong but limited following. Montessori and a few independent schools are notable exceptions to the general cultural opposition to combining children of differing grade levels in a single class.

Teacher education according to a graded standard creates teachers who are ill-prepared (and often poorly supported) for the task of combined grades, and this lack of training can reinforce a negative mind-set. Teachers who are neither fortified by training nor have a sound philosophical foundation from which to teach can find it difficult to embrace the task. Although a few years ago there were continuing education programs and workshops available for teachers working with multiage pedagogy, currently it is difficult to find anyone providing such support. None of my questionnaire respondents were aware of any training for teaching in a combined-grades classroom save for standard Montessori training. Additionally, several experts and authors in the field of multiage education (not Montessori) could point to no currently available resources beyond published studies.

Waldorf School Conceptions

Beyond the cultural backdrop of pervasive negative attitudes about combined grades and multiage classrooms, Waldorf school teachers may have additional psychological and social filters formed in their own teacher education, as well as those of their peer group, including those of the Association of Waldorf Schools of North America (AWSNA). (Baertges, 2009) Advocates of Waldorf education question whether developmental curriculum guidelines can be met within a structure of combined grades. In light of multiage pedagogy, a main point of departure for Waldorf teachers is that Steiner related the structure of child development to age, whereas the multiage approach sees child development as progressing through stages in an individual, and these stages are not necessarily so tightly age related. Steiner's developmental tasks, related to age, do not stop with child development, but rather continue as seven-year cycles throughout a human lifespan (Steiner, 1907), making development part of an all-encompassing philosophy that teachers are loathe to misinterpret or disregard.

> Combining grades can allow the teacher to form a large enough group to be dynamic and to embody the social aspects of Waldorf education.

To complicate matters, an ongoing discourse comparing Waldorf and Montessori methods tends to be prejudiced according to the author or speaker. This seemingly competitive positioning of the two approaches may influence a Waldorf teacher's unwillingness to embrace what may be perceived as a Montessori technique.

Teaching Approaches

> If one has an eye on human health and human development, then this makes possible correct classroom and educational practice…. The Waldorf school is, in many aspects, completely built on compromises; this fact we do not want to deny. However, only as it is possible today do we educate and teach in the sense of a true knowledge of the human being. (In Riccio, 2002)

Waldorf school teachers approach their combined grades in different ways. Most find them-

selves either alone in the task or supported by a faculty group that is trying to make the most out of less-than-desirable conditions. A few teachers have been consistently at this task for years—observing, cultivating, and tending a school design that has grown into a complex organism that blooms in their community year after year. Several teachers, for instance, stated that their schools have found value in keeping Grade 1 as a single grade classroom and beginning to combine classes starting in Grade 2.

Below, compiled from interviews and questionnaires, are four ways to address the needs of combined grades in Waldorf schools. These constructs are not mutually exclusive, but constitute a variety of tools that teachers use to manage their classrooms. Parenthetical comments about grades reflect specific suggestions of the respondents.

Combining ages and grades in Waldorf school classrooms need not be seen as conflicting with Steiner's indications, but may be seen as a call to meet them from a fresh perspective.

Strategies for Combined-Grades Teaching in Waldorf Schools

1) Separate students for main lessons:
   a) Grade-specific main lessons provided by different teachers at the usual time.
   b) Alternate timing of grade-based main lessons.
2) Group students by ability or as needed:
   a) Group by grade for main lesson when the curriculum poses a particularly difficult combination of topics (blocks for Grades 2 and 3 were noted).
   b) Split the class for math work (Grades 3 and 4 were noted).
   c) Split the class for math and language arts (starting in Grade 5 was noted).
   d) Use creative grouping and splitting.
3) Use an alternate school calendar:
   a) Time the school year by teaching as if you start in the northern hemisphere and migrate to the southern hemisphere—the calendar and school years match more closely in the southern hemisphere (e.g., January-June starts a new grade; fall continues this work). In practice, this involves beginning the year with the lower grade's blocks and proceeding to the next grade's blocks after the winter break.
4) Use a homeschool or individual approach:
   a) In a small class, a homeschool approach can teach each student one by one.

Splitting a class by grade for main lesson does not have to create a feeling of distinct class levels. The two-teacher (or teacher-with-assistant) approach can be used as an ongoing solution or for assuring that all students work through certain blocks at a given age but do not have to repeat them the following year. These groupings may be strictly based on age indicators or on needs observed by teachers. Three teachers interviewed said that they considered the "soul need," as distinct from the chronological age, of the child as a partial indicator of student readiness for a topic of study. Teachers looked carefully at topics with regard to the specific children and ages represented in their classrooms. A teacher with a combined class of first and second graders, for example, deemed fables and animal tales appropriate for the second half of first grade, but felt that she would not teach more emotionally and spiritually advanced stories like those of sages and saints until the beginning of the next school year.

It takes careful planning to make the topics from the curriculum fresh for students who have already begun particular grade-level work the previous year. Students and parents complained when one teacher ended a school year with Hebrew stories and continued to study Hebrew stories when students returned in the fall. Following curriculum indications with students of more varied ages requires the diligence of teachers to examine continually and carefully the effects of their work. This diligence is weightier but easier to achieve in a Waldorf school, since teachers continue with students and their families for several years. One knowledgeable teacher is responsible for the progression and integrity of the children's education.

Benefits of Combined Grades in Waldorf Schools

> The margin between the challenged and the intelligent pupils which, on 24th July 1920, Steiner called a makeshift arrangement, would hardly become wider by putting classes together, but the working together of older and younger pupils which Steiner thought to be beneficial could come into full play.
>
> (Stockmeyer, 1991)

Although most Waldorf school teachers consider teaching a combined grades class in a Waldorf setting to be less desirable than teaching a single grade class, respondents noted several benefits. Combining grades can allow the teacher to form a large enough group to be dynamic and to embody the social aspects of Waldorf education. There is naturalness about being part of a varied age group with people of different stages of development working together. Many teachers enjoyed their students' accomplishments and their subsequent ability to support or guide others. Ideal class size depends on many factors, but, generally, respondents noted that a combined class should not enroll more students than a single grade equivalent.

Some benefits were considered to be so important that teachers stated that they would seek out ways to incorporate them into their classrooms even in a single-grade situation. A few teachers felt strongly that the benefits of teaching combined grades outweighed the dictate of a single-grade philosophy. These included the sense that the creativity involved in teaching was even more strongly drawn upon to meet the needs of their students than it would be in a single-grade experience. Below are other aspects that teachers appreciated:

1) Mentorship
   a) Teacher authority takes its place in a natural hierarchy that includes student achievement and shifting roles in the classroom.
   b) Older students take pride in modeling achievement, attitude, and behavior, and they feel responsible for the younger ones.
   c) Younger students look up to the older students and anticipate future participation in next-level activities.
   d) Student activities can be based on age or ability; flexible groupings support individuals without creating stigma.
   e) Mentorship is cultivated—children enjoy sharing their strengths and skills.

2) Diversity
   a) Students can be grouped depending on needs and preferences (teacher or student-designated), and children generally choose their own groupings well.
   b) Learning experiences and challenges shift due to diversity.
   c) Some work can "level the playing field" and unite the class, such as cooking, games, and festivals.
   d) Regardless of the topic of study, everyone can celebrate holidays.
   e) The habit of integrating differences helps students "not to form a pack that singles itself out" or is singled out.
   f) Uniformity of development does not always fit the student's age—individuals can display soul needs (assessed by faculty and other support) that are inconsistent with calendar age.
   g) One teacher says, "Like a rainbow, combined grades classes are more colorful, more beautiful, with a greater combination and integration of ages."

3) Attitudes and abilities
   a) Students learn to work independently.
   b) Multiage can serve high-needs students better—they can participate without feeling out of place.
   c) Students learn patience and tolerance.

In summary, the Waldorf school teachers who saw a combined grades classroom as a creative challenge and found pedagogical support (rather than overwhelming conflict) in Steiner's indications seemed to agree with Gajadharsingh. "The teacher who rises to the challenge and who has motivated pupils finds the multi-program class has a revitalizing effect." (Gayfer, 1991)

Advice from Teachers

> The school's philosophy becomes the compass for staying the mission's course.
>
> (Grant, 1996)

Educational literature suggests that multiage programs select students with care, as this is critical to the success and quality of teaching within this model. Referring to classroom composition the authors of *Our Best Advice, The Multiage Problem Solving Handbook* state, "This is the one very important aspect that must not be left to chance." (Grant, 1996)

Commentary from Waldorf school teachers echoes this consideration and provides counsel. Classrooms must be carefully balanced without over-representing students who require remedial work and, on the other hand, a teacher must take care not to tax an academically advanced child through inappropriate grouping by achievement level. Work should feel doable to students. More practice work, homework, and challenge work may be given to more advanced students. Additionally, the teacher may want to consider the balance of temperaments when grouping or even when admitting new students.

Several Waldorf school teachers recommended avoiding reference to student grade ranking, as it divides the class into age-based groupings that may not serve the classroom community. One teacher felt that grade differentiation gives the message that they only half belong. When choosing curriculum components, one needs to focus on what most defines the year(s) and work out the block rotation according to student readiness and other factors. One teacher says that her students get all of some of the Grade 4 curriculum and all of some of the Grade 5 curriculum—she avoids fragmenting the blocks to try to fit them all in. In the case of altering the curriculum delivery for mixed ages, it is important that the teacher has a plan that offers its own integrity.

Above all, teachers who participated in this work considered the teacher's own spiritual and personal development as important. Planning well and opening up to and trusting the creative process work for them and reduce fear and control issues that drain energy.

Since they are not a part of traditional Waldorf schools, combined classes require inner work and strong imagination. One participant mentioned that the power of the teacher's thinking affects the child's doing and the teacher's actions affect the child's feeling life. He posited that if the teacher's etheric and astral bodies had processed the work and rested, they would be prepared to bring the material freshly to the student; if, however, the teacher was at odds with the work at hand, or felt overwhelmed by it, the children would feel it and would respond accordingly.

Another teacher who instructs six children ranging in age from seven through eleven (grades 1-5) says that she pictures angels covering the ears of the younger students when she is delivering lessons to the older ones; the younger students happily work together on their projects and do not seem to be affected by the lesson presented to their classmates. This teacher says that she considers her work to be a joy, that "all flows and fits perfectly."

As general advice, the following comments were offered by experienced combined grades Waldorf school teachers:

1) Classroom Management
   a) Nurture the spirit of community.
   b) Give students the experiences of being both the older and the younger students in groupings.
   c) Putting older students in charge is great for the classroom energy—they can assist in circle (taking a leadership role), help with ideas for math and grammar work, and be a support person.
   d) Ban the word "bored" and cultivate creative self-direction.
   e) Help each student to choose an on-going "independent study" topic so he or she may effectively use extra time.

2) Material Considerations
   a) Seek resources, including workbooks, teaching assistant, logistical options.
   b) Two-sided rolling chalkboards can work as a room divider.
   c) A small connected room can help.
   d) It is useful to have lots of nooks or work stations.
   e) Have plenty of work available for students.
   f) Assignments for students may be photocopied.
   g) Key Curriculum Press series for math is useful.

h) Flash Kids curriculum series by Harcourt Family Learning for language arts and math skills also help.

3) Parent Relations
a) Let parents know what might be missed from the graded curriculum and recommend books and activities to supplement classroom work.
b) Educate parents about the benefits of multiage classrooms.
c) Remain in close contact with parents, particularly with regard to their children.
d) If a child is ill-suited for the class, take action.

Waldorf school teachers who were able to realize the benefits of having a spectrum of student ages approached their work using more of the tenets of the multiage pedagogy. These teachers generally focused more on the positive aspects of teaching than on the negative aspects of combined grades. More profoundly, they seemed to have clear pedagogical reasons for their approach. These teachers were aware of the implications of the grade-by-grade curriculum standard in Waldorf education, but they did not allow it to keep them from serving their students; instead, they relied on Steiner's indications and applied them to the best of their ability.

Conclusion

> Life in its entirety is like a plant. The plant contains not only what it offers to external life; it also holds a future state within its hidden depths. One who has before him a plant only just in leaf, knows very well that after some time there will be flowers and fruit also on the leaf-bearing stem. In its hidden depths the plant already contains the flowers and fruit in embryo; yet by mere investigation of what the plant now offers to external vision, how should one ever tell what these new organs will look like? This can only be told by one who has learnt to know the very nature and being of the plant. (Steiner, 1907)

A stronger program is built from a foundation that is educational rather than administrative. Classroom composition dictated by administrative convenience or economic reality promotes a sense of compromise. Few can feel good about a compromised education, and no one wants the education of their own children to be administered in a way that feels sub-standard. Administrative structure may indeed hold on to tenets that represent an idealized model, but it should not adversely affect the ability of a school or a teacher to teach children.

Combining ages and grades in Waldorf school classrooms need not be seen as conflicting with Steiner's indications, but may be seen as a call to meet them from a fresh perspective. A practice of astute observation, cultivation of inner life, and creative teaching are central to Steiner's instruction for teachers.

To see combining grades as a compromise is to support these teachers less. To insist on larger or more urban Waldorf schools is to restrict Steiner education to those places where material support allows only one view of it; this, too, is a compromise. As a movement toward localization takes hold, the time is ripe to find ways to reinforce the creative implementation of Steiner's methods. *A Study of Small Schools and Combined Grades in Finland* (Peifila,1978) states that "preservation of schools in sparsely populated areas is considered a better solution than school systems in population agglomerates."

Steiner's comment on plants provides an analogy for the growth of Waldorf schools on different continents and in different times:

> But I cannot carry a plant about all over the place; it will not remain the same. Its nature is only complete in conjunction with the soil, with the forces that spring from the earth, and with all the forces of the sun which fall upon this particular portion of the earth. Together with these the plant makes a totality. … We must take our start, not from the plant or the plant family, but from the landscape, the geographical region: from an understanding of what the earth is in a particular place. And the nature of plants must be treated in relation to the whole earth. (Steiner, 1922)

Just as a plant thrives only in its own habitat, so too approaches to Waldorf education must grow according to and within their own condi-

tions. We can all admire strong schools that have a sturdy and persevering tradition of Waldorf education, and we can also strive to build our own schools to their full capacity. Every step along the way requires adult compromise, but the compromise need not be in the education of children. As Steiner said, and as any conscious human being may say, "One has to weigh up the needs of the individual man with those of practical life." (Stockmeyer, 1991)

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