Why dividing us by age in school doesn't make sense

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It absolutely blew my mind. During one of our first conversations over Skype, [Skinner](#) was telling me that dividing children by age in schools doesn't make sense. After a few seconds of skepticism, I took his argument seriously and I realized that the idea of grouping students by age was an assumption I had never challenged before.

2 years later that call with Skinner, I'm in Chile building Exosphere with him, and this morning while passing by a college here in Reñaca I couldn't think of anything else than: *why do they divide them by age? It doesn't make sense!*

Isn't it *natural* and obviously beneficial for children to be learning next to other children of approximately the same age?

What we take for granted and see as "*how things are*", is often just "*how things have been done lately*". The fact that we grow up doing things in a certain way tends to install in us the assumption that that's the unique way to do them, and that humans have always been doing them that way.

It is, simply enough, how we build our map of the world when we grow up. As we update our maps of reality by new information, and as it's very difficult and rare to have accurate information about the past, we usually go through life without recognizing many of our assumptions for what they are.

Further discussion and research about age-grading convinced me that what most people think as *natural* is actually a mistaken idea implemented by education bureaucrats at the beginning of the last century.

"It is constructed upon the assumption that a group of minds can be marshalled and controlled in growth in exactly the same manner that a military officer marshalls and directs the bodily movements of a company of soldiers. In solid, unbreakable phalanx the class is supposed to move through all the grades, keeping in locked step. This locked step is set by the 'average' pupil—an algebraic myth born of inanimate figures and an addled pedagogy. The class system does injury to the rapid and quick-thinking pupils, because these must shackle their stride to keep pace with the mythical average. But the class system does a greater injury to the large number who make slower progress than the rate of the mythical average pupil . . . They are foredoomed to failure before they begin.

Could any system be more stupid in its assumptions, more impossible in its conditions, and more juggernautic in its operation?"

This critic of age-grading was written in 1912 by Frederick Burk, first president of what became California State University at San Francisco, and quoted by Charles E. Silberman in his book *Crisis in the Classroom*. Many other authors agree upon the fact that our modern education system is the evolution of the [Prussian model](#), imported in the US and taken as standard all over the world.

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We may argue the model to be at least out-dated and worth-revisiting, if not universally wrongly conceived.

Age being the most important characteristic that children and students share and therefore the parameter for putting them together is also one of the ideas most criticized by Sir Ken Robinson, in his world-famous TED Talk [Changing Education Paradigms](#):

"Students are educated in batches, according to age, as if the most important thing they have in common is their date of manufacture."

Why do we divide children by age? Is it the best way to foster growth and learning?

We all know (it's true for everyone and each of us!) that what you learn out of curiosity and interest sticks with you forever, while what you study out of threat of punishment will fade away very soon after the test is passed. Given that different people are curious and interested in different topics at different times, if we really care about learning we shouldn't build a system that force every child on earth to study *this* when he is 7 years old and *that* when he is 7 years old and a half, *this other thing* when he is 12 and *that one* when he is 13.

Age doesn't matter that much. **Children and students should be immersed in an environment that allows them to dig into their curiosity at the moment they feel interest for a particular subject. And not in a one-fit-for-all 15 years long schedule.**

Also, in the real world we all have to be interacting with people of different ages at the same time. Throughout life, the years spent in traditional school are the only ones where we are segregated by age: as adults, we encounter and have to interact with people both older and younger than we are. Why do we create a fake world for our children?

They should learn from the beginning how to manage many very different relationships simultaneously, and slowly get used to the complexity of life. They should be developing the ability to play different roles given the circumstances, and not switching just between *equal* (relating to their peers) and *submitted* (related to authority). This is extremely important because we shape the perception of our relationships in a binary mode that is a dangerous

oversimplification: then you have 25 years old smart graduates who still think that the world is run by geniuses and that their teachers and professors know everything about everything, while they do not see value in their peers and themselves.

This last thought leads to another argument against dividing children by age: it's based on the assumption that only experts could teach.

Learning is gradual. In order to learn, you need someone who was in your situation not long ago and now is just a few steps ahead. He will be able to relate to **your** problems because he has a fresh experience of them, and he will be able to help you overcome them much better than someone who was at your stage sometimes decades ago.

Older and younger students would play different roles in the learning environment and the variety would benefit all of them. Older students relating to younger peers would learn to tolerate and act respectful towards them and teaching them would become their best way to foster self-confidence about what they learned.

At [Exosphere](#), we oppose the traditional top-down system, and we implement peer to peer learning in most of our activities. As our participants usually range between 19 yrs. and 50-something yrs., all from different backgrounds and cultures: in Hydra I, the current program, we have 15 countries, from Colombia to Ghana, from Vietnam to the Netherlands, represented by artists, economists, coders, ex-soldiers, engineers and more, we witness this reality every day in our programs.

Last week was Coding Challenge week, and the dynamics described above are observable more than ever. Each participant has a different level of knowledge about coding, but they are in mixed groups and let run free. We have a few expert coders who follow the groups' advancements, helping with suggestions but never solving problems for them. Most of the learning is self-learning and peer-learning, a win-win situation.

Variety is guarantee for innovation, for discover, for learning and growth, from a personal standpoint as well as from a professional one. The mix of experience and age is what allows them to flourish and learn with unbelievable results.

The way people learn is the foundation for how they approach the rest of life,
and Exosphere's current programs and operations are the starting point of our strategy to
offer alternatives in primary, secondary, university and adult education in the coming years.

Exosphere's philosophy is that learning is a methodology for approaching all of life, seeing everything we do, everything we experience as an opportunity for a new experiment, a new improvement, a new invention. Free exploration of the world around us should be the muse for every child, every teenager, every adult, and a seamless life of learning and creating is the highest calling of each and every human being.

A new model for education is possible. This is what we are building, because we do want to make sense.

Source:

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