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Book Review: The Multi-age Learning Community in Action: Creating a Caring School Environment for All Children

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Book Review

The Multi-age Learning Community in Action: Creating a Caring School Environment for All Children (2017)

Barbara Cozza

Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield

242 pages; \$84.00 USD (Hardback); \$42.00 USD (Paperback)

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Reviewed by Elizabeth Gil, Ph.D.

In *The Multi-age Learning Community in Action: Creating a Caring School Environment for All Children*, Barbara Cozza combines her extensive practice in the field of education and various theories in order to offer a comprehensive model for “re-culturing schools” (p. 43). Incorporating her professional experience, including as a director of multi-age programs, and research in the areas of change, learning theory, and brain research, in an accessible and clear manner, Cozza provides descriptions of how to develop schools as multi-age learning communities (MAC). Multi-age learning communities are environments where educators develop integrated vision plans that put “the learner first and then build what the learner needs” (p. xiv). By grounding ideas in research and best practice, leaders can avoid the common error of having a “jumble of initiatives” (p. xiii) that do not, ultimately, result in improved outcomes for students.

The book does not promise overnight success, or present MAC as a silver bullet. Rather, *The Multi-age Learning Community in Action* emphasizes that developing multi-age learning communities is an organizational and culture-building process. The MAC framework is based on a belief system associated with several practices, including centering the child, addressing developmental learning, and promoting active learning. Cozza stresses the flexibility of MAC because the process can be adopted school-wide or in different ways, including gradually, based on the needs of a specific system. Further, MAC

and does not require a specific curriculum because its foundation is the culture of the school. Cozza also recognizes that, as a large undertaking, a school may want to make use of consultants who can support a school's transition to a multi-age learning program. Among the practices that strengthen the effort to transition to MAC are having professional development prior to the school adopting MAC and engaging various stakeholders prior to making changes. This approach can "encourage relational trust among teachers, parents, and school leaders" (p. xiv), and is crucial because transition and institutionalization of MAC requires distributed leadership and collective accountability shared among the adults in the school.

The Multi-age Learning Community in Action is organized into four sections with two to three chapters dedicated to each of the following: organizational practice, culture building, the learning process, and assessment and systematic change. A vignette based on the author's experience in multi-age communities opens each chapter and each chapter ends with a reflection that summarizes major points. Each chapter also includes "snapshots" that exemplify different highlighted concepts, such as launching MAC and project-based learning in multi-age communities. The book is at its strongest when it provides concrete examples of possible schedules, how to plan units, curriculum maps, and how to cycle themes over a three-year period in a MAC setting. There is also space dedicated to questions for leaders and teachers introducing MAC into their schools.

The book also provides appendixes that include templates for checklists, logs and other forms that support the work of school leaders, coaches, and teachers. These support materials, such as principal walkthrough and classroom observation checklists, reflect school practices related to MAC and each contains space for observation notes. The teacher journal reinforces practitioner reflection regarding evidence of class success, challenges met and how a school's MAC team can help meet teacher needs. As schools make use of these tools, they can accrue data that to then be examined within assessments of their effectiveness in promoting multi-age learning communities for students. An additional useful aspect of the forms is that they are available online for readers to download and reproduce PDF versions of the materials found in the section.

The book does not heavily address issues where there may be difficulties in transitioning traditional programs to multi-age programs, but focuses on the trust, culture and the steps that must be taken to develop an effective

program to meet students' needs. In the sections of the book regarding the multi-age program's ability to support English language learners (ELLs) and students with disabilities, the book could provide more information regarding these students' assets that the multi-age program inherently recognizes. For example, some ELLs already come from settings that value multi-age environments and interactions and collective responsibility, elements embedded in multi-age programs.

While *Multi-age Learning Community in Action* is not geared toward Catholic education, specifically, each chapter in the book does provide a summary of what every school environment should contain in order to implement the various aspects of a strong multi-age program. The program's focus on centering the learner aligns with the Second Vatican Council's Declaration on Christian Education, which states that youth should be supported "to develop harmoniously their physical, moral and intellectual endowments," (National Catholic Register, 2018). Such an education, where students support each other in the classroom, reflect the Declaration's call to help students' formation into people who reach their highest potential and for the good not only of themselves, but of others. This type of educational setting is one where educators prioritize the learner and establish environments that integrate "quality strategies for effective teaching and learning for the 21st century" (Cozza, p. xv). In this type of setting, students' support each other through collaboration and shared problem-solving.

The Multi-age Learning Community in Action: Creating a Caring School Environment for All Children provides a comprehensive overview of the elements needed to re-culture schools through instituting multi-age learning communities, based on years of research and experience. Educators considering transformation of their schools through a strong vision that centers students' needs and strengths, and a desire to enact collective inquiry and responsibility will find guidance to support their efforts.

Reference

What makes Catholic education Catholic? (2018). Retrieved from <http://www.ncregister.com/daily-news/what-makes-catholic-education-catholic>