

The Value of a Multi-Age Learning Community

by Kiana LaDeau

At Pacem School there is a learning community like no other in the state of Vermont. Originally a homeschooling cooperative, it's now an accredited school for middle and high schoolers that provides a flexible, stimulating curriculum, small student-to-teacher ratio, and ample time outdoors. The teachers are kind-hearted, caring, and expert—but one especially unique feature of Pacem is its vibrant, multi-age learning community.

I was fortunate to spend the last three years of my high school career as a student at Pacem. Twice a week, I commuted over an hour to get to school. What made the long drive worth it was the friends I got to see there.

At Pacem, classes are split roughly into age groups, such as middle school science and high school math, although sometimes older or younger kids join a class if it seems like an appropriate fit. The result is that the age of students in a Pacem class usually varies more on average than in same-age classrooms in a typical public school. This brings a greater wealth of experience and diversity to learning settings, and places greater focus on individual development than on measurement against one's peers.

Further facilitating multi-age student interactions are thoughtfully designed outdoor days. These typically involve some form of hiking or camping, and include games and activities that help teach vital team building, awareness, and communication skills. During the school year, students have time outdoors each day where they can mix and mingle freely. On the community green of the Vermont College of Fine Arts (VCFA) campus, which shares its facilities with Pacem, I have seen middle schoolers and high schoolers play tag, kickball, soccer, and capture the flag, as well as numerous cooperative games. What's special about this atmosphere is not just *that* students across various age groups regularly have opportunities to interact with one another, but also *how* they interact.

Older students at Pacem often take on mentoring roles to younger students. This allows them to practice leadership skills and taking responsibility, and provides an opportunity for meaningful contribution to their social community. Younger students benefit greatly from the guidance and support of older students. For me, stepping into leadership roles at Pacem greatly improved my confidence and decision making skills. Most of all, it provided me with a sense of purpose and belonging. I loved when younger students would come to me during break and tell me about a problem they were dealing with. Sometimes all they needed was for me to listen and show empathy, and other times I was able to offer them helpful and encouraging advice. In return, playing games and talking with them allowed me to set down the heavy burdens and pressures I sometimes felt as an older teen, and simply play and be joyful.

Having graduated and moved into the college phase of my life, it is clear to me that these interactions shaped my development in important ways and made me a more compassionate and capable person. Among many things, they taught me to view people younger and older than me as my peers, and to see across age divides and appreciate what everyone has to offer. Pacem School is an example of how learning communities can benefit from supported multi-age relationships. I hope that in the future many people have the opportunity to learn in similar environments: that encourage them to grow in many ways and into many dimensions of being human.