



# Caraway K-6 Program – 'Let the slow times roll!'

By Barb Strange  
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Imagine a school day that begins in this gentle way: children enter the room in the morning and are welcomed by others, greeting the teacher by his or her first name, and settle in to share a book with their parent or with one of the other children's parents. After reading time, the children gather on the carpet for the morning meeting and share their news; the teacher directs them to the agenda and goals of the day. Discussion is two way and animated. If a parent - with or without siblings - chooses to stay for this part of the day or any other, they are welcomed and very much valued. At Caraway, school starts every morning in this relaxed way and everyone looks forward to it.

## Caraway – Where Understanding Matters

For nearly 30 years, Caraway has used hands-on learning and real-life experiences to inspire academic achievement. Children work around a theme based on their interests. Parents have input into the topic, and community experts and parents with knowledge of the topic are invited in at different times during the unit to share this expertise. The entire days' work might centre around the theme.

In the Caraway philosophy, learning is best carried out in this deep and unhurried manner, an approach that has been described more recently as "slow schooling". The concept, modeled after the growing "slow food" movement – as opposed to "fast food" – springs from the work of University of Colorado professor of education Maurice Holt, as described in his article, *It's Time to Start the Slow School Movement*. (<http://www.pdkintl.org/kappan/k0212hol.htm>)

Holt writes, "The idea that 'less is more' fits exactly with an emphasis on intensive rather than extensive experience. Better to eat one portion of grilled halibut than three king-sized burgers. Better to examine in detail the reasons why Sir Thomas More chose martyrdom or why Alexander Hamilton argued for a strong federal government than to memorize the kings of England or the capitals of the states of the union. The slow school is a place where understanding matters more than coverage." The idea is

that critical thinking skills develop most fully when children are given sufficient time to reflect and problem-solve. Perhaps this is why students at Oxford University take only one or two courses per term, making in depth education a concept that has stood the test of time.

Students at slow schools undoubtedly do well. Holt remarks, "...the supreme irony of the slow school is that precisely because it provides the intellectual nourishment students need and puts curriculum first, good test results follow. Success, like happiness, is best pursued obliquely... At a stroke, the notion of the slow school destroys the idea that schooling is about cramming, testing, and standardizing experience." And so we find at Caraway.

Teacher and writer Brenda Dyck of Calgary writes that Holt's article "reminded me of my own learning experiences during an era when it seemed teaching was more about savoring the learning than just getting through it...The realization that many of my most profound learning experiences took place in complex-teaching environments has led me to try to replicate that style of instruction in my own classroom. Using multi-layered topics like children's rights, leadership, restorative justice, and homelessness as jumping off points, my students have participated in simulations, collaborated with students in other countries, and participated in debates about complex issues."

[http://www.educationworld.com/a\\_curr/voice/voice111.shtml](http://www.educationworld.com/a_curr/voice/voice111.shtml)

Our goal at Caraway is precisely this kind of teaching and learning. We also find that students make meaningful connections between ideas when subjects such as language arts, math, and history are combined ("subject integration"). If the theme is "Water", for example, language learning, math, social studies, science, art, phys-ed and music would all be centred around that topic. Hands-on activities might include measuring water, weighing amounts of water, discovering the properties of salt water, exploring ponds, raising tadpoles, reading, writing, dramatizing mermaid stories, and painting water murals. The possibilities are really endless and easily tied into the Alberta curriculum.

### **Multi-age Education at Caraway**

Caraway's developmentally appropriate program is supported by educational research. For example, Caraway takes advantage of the many research-proven benefits of mixed-age groupings across grade levels. Older students are encouraged to be leaders and teachers of younger students, who in turn

thrive in their attention. Students enjoy the stability of having the same teacher two or three years in a row (“looping”).

Research with mixed-age grouping shows that it assists children in developing social skills and a sense of belonging. Studies also show that children in mixed-age classrooms are much less likely to be verbally and physically aggressive with classmates during work or play than those in same-age classes.

Mixed-age researchers Diane McClellan and Susan Kinsey write, “Children seemed to watch out for each other, to be more willing to include a less popular child in play or work groups, and to ask one another for help with a problem.” (<http://www.eric.ed.gov/>)

It is therefore not surprising to find that children in mixed-age groups are more likely than their peers in single-grade classrooms to say that they like school.

Achievement in multi-age classrooms is the same, and in some promising longitudinal studies, better than in traditional single grade classrooms.

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