

Multiage Classrooms: Putting Theory into Practice

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Changes in the education of young children have taken many forms in the recent years. Educational forces are calling for structural as well as instructional improvements. One current trend has been the implementation of multiage programs. Although it is a much discussed issue, it is not a new concept. During the 1960s and early 1970s there was also much talk and excitement about multiage education. The first edition of John Goodlad's and Robert Anderson's book, *The Nongraded Elementary School*, was published in 1959 and provided a rationale and impetus for multiage schooling in the 1960s and early '70s. Although the idea lost interest in the '70s, it gained new popularity in the late eighties. In fact, Kentucky, Mississippi, and Oregon have mandated multiage classrooms for all primary grades (Barker, 1994; Gaustad, 1992a; Lodish, 1992). Not coincidentally, the Goodlad and Anderson book was revised and reissued in 1987. In this paper, we discuss multiage classrooms as more than just a grouping pattern and describe a multiage neighborhood at Celebration School in Celebration, Florida.

What is multiage education?

First-grade, second-grade, third-grade, fourth-grade . . . these categories have been an integral part of American education since the mid-1800s. In fact, it is probably as common to ask a child "What grade are you in?" as to ask "How old are you?" Multiage education attempts to break down this common categorization of students. Joan Gaustad (1992b, p. 2) defines multiage education as "the practice of teaching children of different ages and ability levels together, without dividing them (or the curriculum) into steps labeled by grade designation." Rather than identifying children as being in specific grades, broader categories with labels such as primary and intermediate are used. In a multiage primary class, for example, there may be children ranging from age 5 to age 8. However, multiage programs are much more than the heterogeneous age grouping of students.

Although multiage classes vary, they tend to have many basic characteristics. There are no rows of desks, but tables and chairs that are frequently rearranged. Learning centers are used extensively and are placed in many locations throughout the room. Teachers create learning environments where children are actively involved with materials geared toward hands-on learning. Further, most programs strongly emphasize teacher/student interaction, cooperative learning, and peer tutoring (Oberlander, 1989). Lessons are primarily developed through integrated units, focusing on broad concepts (Surbeck, 1992). Other important features of non-graded classrooms are that students move at their own pace from easier to more difficult material and their progress is evaluated using alternative assessment methods. For example, many multiage programs use checklists, portfolios, observations, and anecdotal records (Gaustad, 1992b). Besides being members of small groups, students in multiage classrooms also work independently, in pairs, and in large groups. During group projects, children contribute according to their skill level. Gaustad (1992b, p. 2) provides the following example: "In making books to display what they learned about a topic, younger students can create illustrations while older children write the text."

Robert Anderson (1993) states that authentic multiage programs should meet (or come close to meeting) the following criteria:

- replacement of labels associated with gradedness, like first grade and fifth grade with group titles like primary unit
- replacement of competitive-comparative evaluation systems (and the report cards associated with them) with assessment and reporting mechanisms that respect continuous individual progress and avoid competitive comparisons
- all groupings to include at least two heterogeneous age cohorts
- groups assembled for instructional purposes to be non-permanent, being dissolved and reconstituted as needed
- organization of the teaching staff into teams,

with teachers having maximum opportunities to interact and collaborate

- development of a flexible, interdisciplinary, whole-child-oriented curriculum, with grade-normed book and tests used only as resources (if used at all)
- adoption of official policies consistent with nongradedness in the school and at the school board level.

Unlike the multi-grade classrooms of the past, multiage classrooms are intentionally blended in order to take advantage of the different skills and talents students at various ages can offer (Miller, 1996). Katz, Evangelou, and Hartman (1990) claim that children spontaneously create mixed-age peer groups in a natural environment because children of different ages supplement each other's needs and abilities. Many educators (Pavan, 1992; Katz, 1995; Gaustad, 1995; Ishler and Vogel 1996) believe that multiage classrooms make learning more developmentally appropriate.

In a single-age classroom, normative pressures are placed on children because of the constant comparison to age-mates (Katz, 1995). As Gaustad (1992b, p. 2) points out, "Graded education assumes that students who are the same age are at basically the same level of cognitive development, can be taught in the same way, and will progress at the same rate." In reality, the intellectual development of young children varies just as their physical development does. Gaustad (1992b, p. 2) states that a child's intellectual development "may alternately spurt ahead and hit plateaus rather than moving at a steady pace." Traditional, graded elementary programs offer very little consideration in regards to the highly variable development of children.

This variability, however, is an underlying theoretical premise of multiage programs. While multiage education does not magically erase the differences in ability levels among students, it does recognize that students learn at different paces regardless of where their "grade" tells them they should be. In a multiage classroom, children who are progressing more slowly are not viewed at having a deficit (Surbeck, 1992). Rather, the multiage classroom is set up so that children can make continuous progress at their own rate of development; a wider range of behaviors and abilities is accepted. Therefore, children are able to spend

more time in an academic area if necessary, or progress more rapidly through content that has been easily mastered.

This continuous progress is achieved through the use of flexible grouping. Flexible grouping requires teachers to regroup students frequently to ensure that each student is working at his or her individual level of achievement (Pavan, 1992). A variety of groupings also give students opportunities to work with various children. Cushman (1990) describes the following ways to group children of different ages in multiage settings:

problem-solving grouping in which learners are grouped around a common unsolved topic or problem;

needs-requirement grouping in which students are instructed in a specific concept, skill, or value;

reinforcement grouping for learners who need more work in a specific area or task;

interest grouping in which learners who are interested in the same thing work together; and

learning-style grouping in which learners with a common pattern of learning are taught together.

The Neighborhood Experience at Celebration School

Celebration School is a K-12 public school in Celebration, Florida, comprising eight multiage neighborhoods. There are five K-5 neighborhoods comprising the Lower School and two 6-7, two 8-9, and one 10-12 neighborhood constituting the Upper School. Each neighborhood may be considered a school within a school, where learners and learning leaders interact throughout the day. While the physical space in each neighborhood is relatively similar, consisting of several different arrangements of carpeted and tiled areas, each neighborhood feels very different because of the ways the learning leaders have structured the learning environment. The curriculum at Celebration School is held accountable to meet the Florida Sunshine State Standards, as are all other Florida schools. The school encompasses a student-centered approach to teaching with emphasis on multiple intelligences, cooperative learning, authentic assessment, personalized learning plans, full inclusion, integrated learning, and school/community technology linkages.

It is hoped that a brief description of one neighborhood will be helpful in understanding how the multiage approach is incorporated into the fabric of the school. Lower One, a K-5 neighborhood, has approximately 100 students and four learning leaders. The students are arranged into four base groups, two involving kindergarten through second grade students, and two base groups including third-through fifth grade students. Because of a deep commitment to multiage learning, several opportunities are structured throughout the week for the larger "family" of students to work together, including Grand Kiva, Reading Buddies, and Kid Picks.

All students in Lower One assemble weekly in Grand Kiva, grouped in the hearth area of the Neighborhood on the carpeted floor. Groups of 25 K-5 students interact with learning leaders, focusing on team building, self-understanding, communication, and the understanding of others. The membership of these groups is rotated throughout the semester to give the students an opportunity to work with everyone in the Neighborhood. Smaller Pride Groups are formed later in the semester consisting of six members, one from each grade level. The Pride Groups sit and work together during Grand Kiva and are available at other times to encourage, support, and nurture each other. The openness of the Neighborhood floor plan allows students to see and interact with each other, without being disruptive to others.

Reading Buddies meet every Wednesday. Each primary student is paired with an intermediate student for a shared reading experience. The students select their own books and take turns reading the stories.

Part of every Thursday is spent in Kid Picks, a favorite multiage opportunity. Each learning leader selects an area of interest to develop and share with groups of K-5 students. The topics change each semester and students are placed into Kid Picks according to their first, second, or third choices. Examples of Kid Picks topics are canvas embroidery, medieval lettering, Florida reptiles, and fairy tale puppetry.

The daily schedule for a primary student in Lower One is detailed in Figure 1. When the stu-

dents return from wellness, art or music they meet for a song, calendar activities, and a theme or a center lesson. A Neighborhood Theme, that is, medieval times, is selected to integrate the learning experiences. Next the students write daily goals, consult their daily contracts, and select their first learning center. Approximately 18 centers are available to reinforce and extend the learning activities being introduced in reading and math focus groups. Learning leaders prepare the daily contracts which detail the centers the students will visit each day and when the students will meet in content area focus groups with a teacher. Once the students are engaged in their centers, the two learning leaders meet with skill based reading groups and grade level based spelling and handwriting groups. Writing is incorporated into these focus groups. After lunch, read aloud, and recess the students follow the afternoon portion of their daily contracts while learning leaders meet with skill based math groups. The day ends with journal writing, the distribution of homework folders and clean up. Each evening the students are asked to participate in 15- to 20 minutes of nightly reading, with an appropriate written or drawn response. Math, reading, and writing assignments are added as appropriate.

The daily schedule for an intermediate student in Lower One is detailed in Figure 2. A visitor to Lower One would see children working together in small groups and independently in all areas of the physical space. Learning leaders may be found circulating to groups of students, helping individual students, or working with a content focus group. A student is just as likely to consult another student as she is to locate a learning leader when she needs help. Computers are clustered in groups around the neighborhood, each one linked to the local area network and a neighborhood printer. Each student has his own computer account that gives the student access to the appropriate software and Internet access.

Keeping Lower School students in one neighborhood throughout their K-5 experience encourages the sense of a nurturing family environment. Siblings are placed in the same neighborhood. Parents are encouraged to visit and volunteer in their children's neighborhood. Little time is needed in the beginning of each school year to acclimate students to the neighborhood's routines and proce-

dures since the students are continuing with most of the same students and learning leaders. The incoming kindergartners are easily embraced into the neighborhood.

Factors in Implementing a Multiage Classroom

The overall effectiveness of a multiage classroom is dependent on a number of factors. The first key is the use of the process approach to learning which emphasizes teaching children, rather than curriculum (Stone, 1995). Within the teaching of broad academic subjects, learning should reflect a more integrated, holistic, and constructivist approach (Douglas, 1995; Surbeck, 1992). The second factor is that of the teacher as facilitator of learning rather than the source of knowledge. However, teachers need to know the children in order to meet their instructional needs (Stone, 1995). Third, an integrated, thematic approach should provide a variety of activities in which children work together and individually on projects that contribute in different ways to the total effort (Katz, 1992). Fourth, the learning environment should encourage active, hands-on experiences (Stone 1995). Fifth, cross-age learning should be promoted through the use of cooperative learning and peer tutoring (Stone, 1995). Flexible grouping should also allow for increased interaction between students and more time for teachers to devote to small groups of students with special needs or interests. (Banks, 1997). Finally, without the appropriate amount of planning, the program will fail.

Teachers should be given at least two years to plan including observing in appropriate sites, experiencing various ages, and creating unique programs to meet the needs of specific school populations as well as individuals (Surbeck, 1992). Moreover, teachers need to be provided training and support for understanding developmentally appropriate educational practices and in implementing multiage programs (Cotton, 1993). As Anderson (1993, p. 12) cautions, simply starting a multiage program is a two-year process. Much time is needed "to work out policies and procedures, to make curriculum changes, to prepare the community, and to provide appropriate staff development and training. To develop a mature and smooth-running operation, with

an integrated, inter disciplinary, and multi-dimensional curriculum may require an additional five years." However, with a well-planned implementation of the model, the benefits are enormous. It is important for schools to take special care in conceiving and planning before actual implementation (Elliott, 1997; Surbeck, 1992).

Conclusion

It should be noted that putting children of different ages together in the same space does not necessarily bring about either beneficial or negative experiences. The quality of the classroom environment, as seen at Celebration School, is more important in influencing the relationships among children and their learning than whether the class is organized in a traditional or multiage structure (Lodish, 1992; Nye, 1995). As Slavin (1992, p. 24) states, "the curriculum and instructional methods used within a nongraded framework are as important as the school organization plan in determining the ultimate effects." Finally, there needs to be much more than just an organizational shift when transitioning to multiage programs. Simply arranging students of various ages together in the same class does not necessarily guarantee a better education. It is only with a thorough implementation of the philosophical principles underlying multiage education that significant change can take place.

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	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY
7:45-8:35	Wellness/Arts/Music	Wellness/Arts/Music	Wellness/Arts/Music	Wellness/Arts/Music	Wellness/Arts/Music
8:40-9:00	Kiva	Kiva	Kiva	Kiva	Kiva
9:00-11:00	Daily Contract/ Goals/Centers Writing Workshop/ Spelling/Writing Reading Groups/ Handwriting/Reading	Daily Contract/ Goals/Centers Writing Workshop/ Reading Groups/ Handwriting/Reading Spelling/Writing	Daily Contract/ Goals/Centers Writing Workshop/ Reading Groups/ Handwriting/Reading Spelling/Writing Reading Buddies	Daily Contract/ Goals/Centers Writing Workshop/ Reading Groups/ Handwriting/Reading Spelling/Writing	Daily Contract/ Goals/Centers Writing Workshop/ Reading Groups/ Handwriting/Reading Spelling/Writing
10:55					
11:00-11:10	Clean Up	Clean Up	Clean Up	Clean Up	Clean Up
11:15-11:45	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch
11:45-12:10	Recess	Recess	Recess	Recess	Recess
12:15-12:25	Read Aloud	Read Aloud	Grand Kiva	Kid Picks	Read Aloud
12:30-1:30	Math Groups	Math Groups	Math Groups	Math Groups	Math Groups
1:35-2:00	Reflection	Reflection	Reflection	Reflection	Reflection
2:00-2:10	Clean Up	Clean Up	Clean Up	Clean Up	Clean Up
2:15	Dismissal	Dismissal	Dismissal	Dismissal	Dismissal

Figure 1. Primary Daily Schedule

	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY
7:45-8:35	Arts	Arts	Arts	Arts	Arts
8:40-8:50	Base /Kiva	Base/Kiva	Base/Kiva	Base/Kiva	Base/Kiva
8:50-9:00	Goal Setting	Strategy Skills	Strategy Skills	Strategy Skills	Strategy Skills
9:00-10:00	Focus	Science	Focus	Science	Focus
10:15-11:05	Guided Read	Lit Circle	Guided Read	Lit Circle	* Guided Reading
11:15-11:45	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch
11:45-12:15	Recess	Recess	Recess	Recess	Recess
12:15-12:30	** RAP	** RAP	Grand Kiva	** Kid Picks	** RAP
12:30-1:00	Discovery	Music Appreciation	Grand Kiva	Kid Picks	Thematic video
1:00-1:15	Discovery	FCAT Prep	Clean up	Kid Picks	Goal evaluation
1:15-2:00	Discovery	Math		Math	Math
2:00-2:15	Clean up	Clean up		Clean up	Clean up

* DARE 10:30-11:15

** RAP=Read Any Place Trumpet 12:00-12:30 M/T/TH/F

Dismissal @ 2:15 unless Wed. @ 1:15

Figure 2. Intermediate Schedule