Record: 1

Title: Multiage classrooms: An age-old educational strategy revisited.

Authors: Kolstad, Rosemarie
McFadden, Andrea

Source: Journal of Instructional Psychology; Mar98, Vol. 25 Issue 1, p14, 5p

Document Type: Article

Subject Terms: *EDUCATIONAL technology
*TEACHING
*EDUCATION
*EDUCATIONAL evaluation
*METHODOLOGY

NAICS/Industry Codes 611699 All Other Miscellaneous Schools and Instruction
611710 Educational Support Services
923110 Administration of Education Programs

Abstract: Evaluates the research findings of the multiage classroom concept and the teaching strategy applied in it. Factors wherein classroom educators attribute advanced academic growth; How multiage classrooms improve and acquire social behaviors and skills; Disadvantages of a multiage classroom; Concerns about multiage classrooms that affect parents, educators and administrators.

Full Text Word Count: 2415

ISSN: 00941956

Accession Number: 394604

Database: Academic Search Premier

Notes: Check Journals A to Z to see if this article is available full text

MULTIAGE CLASSROOMS: AN AGE-OLD EDUCATIONAL STRATEGY REVISITED

The concept of multiage education is not new. In America the idea stems from the one-room schoolhouse as early as the 1 1600s. Minimal student enrollment necessitated that arrangement. Economics helped the multiage configuration, in which small agricultural commUnities required the aid of children during planting and harvest. Furthermore, teachers and facilities were scarce and expensive; formal education was not generally perceived as necessary for day-to-day existence and survival (Daniel, 1995). Students attended school without any regularity. Individual teachers worked with the students of a community, where every possible combination of ages and levels existed simultaneously (Osin, 1996). Students were grouped in units based on their abilities, rather than age. Advancement to the next unit depended on mastery of subject matter, regardless of age or attendance, and students who had mastered content helped those in need of additional assistance.

Growing school populations, advanced teacher training, and curricula development brought about sin ale-age grouping of students, the configuration of today's elementary schools (Daniel, 1995). However, the one-room schoolhouse concept still lives on in some small communities, where economics and reality dictate class and school size, and in some

elementary schools where multiage classroom instruction has been implemented for its own merits.

This article takes a critical look at research findings of the multiage classroom concept and delineates the pros and cons of such a teaching strategy"

Proponents of multiage classroom instruction claim that students perform better academically than do their single-age classroom counterparts (Kasten, 1993). Educators report advantages in the areas of academia, self-esteem, and socialization skills. Furthermore, teachers and parents benefit from the sense of continuity that multiage classrooms provide.

Educators of such classrooms attribute advanced academic growth to several factors. Within the multiage classroom structure, students often work alone or in large or small group settings. The grouping of children as individuals working alone, or in small groups, requires students to take responsibility for their own learning, and their own academic success (Grant, 1996). Often students serve as peer-tutors, thereby taking on the expert role, as well as raising their own level of learning and retention. Weekly teacher-student conferences are integral parts to student achievement in the multiage classroom. Because students progress at their own individual rate, teacher-student conferences are important to monitor student achievement, direct curriculum, provide individual instruction, delineate implementation of corrective measures, and set and assess goals (Miletta, 1996). Language acquisition and development seem to show the largest growth margin in students involved in the multiage classroom concept, since children in mixed-age situations have heightened verbal experiences. Children adjust their language in relation to their audience; Consequently younger children raise their language skills when associated with older students, a situation provided daily in the multiage classroom (Grant, 1993).

In addition to academic advances, students in multiage classrooms serve as peer-teachers or peer-tutors, which gives them a sense of intrinsic pride and success when empowered to act as teacher for another student or group of students. The peer-tutor experience gives the student a sense of pride and an increase in self-esteem (Kasten, 1993). Another advantage is that the placing of older, more advanced students in the role of peer-teacher with younger students allows them to serve as positive role models and is conducive to bringing about positive social behavior in younger students (Grant, 1993). Students in the multiage classroom have the freedom to learn at their own developmental rate without fear or embarrassment of failure or retention (Kasten, 1993); this reduces their anxiety to school and learning and removes the pressure of trying to "keep-up" with peers. Negative attitudes are much less evident, because students are accepted and positively reinforced for achieving at their own level (Grant, 1993). Students contribute to the learning situation at various levels working together in a combined effort to achieve a common goal (Ellis, 1996). Special needs students obtain individualized instruction from other students who have similar specie I needs and backgrounds. Students helping one another promotes the feeling that differences are the norm and not the exception and represents a tremendous self-esteem boost to all students involved (Grant, 1993).

Students in multiage classrooms improve and acquire social behaviors and skills through direct involvement within a diverse age group. Positively affected are helping, sharing, cooperating, and caring for, as well as taking responsibility for the success of others (Ellis, 1996). In this situation older students are provided an opportunity to use their assertive and help-giving behaviors, while younger students develop help-seeking behaviors. These

students become similar to their friends, and the assimilation may initiate the accession of new social behaviors and skills. Additionally, multiage grouping will allow for a broader pool of candidates from which to develop friendships for students who, lacking social confidence, do not find friendships within their own age group. By enlarging the scope of ages and maturity levels, students are more likely to find a group to which to belong without reference to grade or maturation level (Allen, 1989).

Teacher-parent relationship development is an important advantage of the multiage classroom, since students remain with the same teacher for a lengthy time span, usually three years, fostering a sense of continuity. The need for establishment of such relationships at the beginning of the school year is alleviated (Miller, 1994).

Disadvantages of a Multiage Classroom

While reported advantages of multiage classrooms benefit students, reported weaknesses primarily involve parents, educators, and administrators. One study of multiage classrooms determined that half of the principals reported that parents of children are either negative or very negative about multiage education (Veeman, 1995). Parents of students placed in a multiage environment are concerned about the quality of academics their children will receive. This concern is most prevalent from parents of older children. One study reported that even parents of children who had spent a profitable year as the youngest wanted to transfer their children out at the end of the year to avoid their being the oldest in the room (Gaustad, 1994). The main concern of parents was that their children were not being challenged in the multiage classroom, while parents of older students felt that the curriculum would be watered down to be more on level with the younger students (NEA, 1995). These parent concerns are very real and must be addressed by educators and administrators who intend to implement multiage classrooms.

Classroom teachers are another group which vents concerns about multiage classroom teaching, since this environment requires more planning and monitoring than a single grade classroom (Grant, 1993). In a significant finding concerning teachers assigned to teach in a multiage classroom whose structure they did not choose, and were not prepared to teach, 40% of the respondents felt ill prepared for multiage classroom teaching and received no training to deal with the situation(Veeman, 1995)(NEA, 1995). Veeman reported that it is generally assumed that educators who are familiar with teaching a single-age classroom can successfully function in a multigrade classroom. Often educators in multigrade environments teach individual grade levels separately in certain academic areas; integration and multilevel teaching is found not to exist in mathematics and reading (Veeman, 1995). Furthermore, teachers are incapable of having students work independently, while involved in instructing another group. Some teachers found the groups to be almost competing for their attention while teaching another group (Grant, 1993). In addition to the lack of time for actual instruction, teachers also report a lack of planning and preparation time. Planning for instruction in the multiage classroom must be thematic, conceptual, and skill-based. Teachers rely on projects and activities which are age level appropriate, multilevel in nature, and touch on some or most of the multiple intelligence, not on textbooks and ditto sheets. While planning; time is integral to the success of students, it presents great difficulty for the educator, since this doubled their planning, teaching, grading and record keeping time (Grant, 1993). Educators presently assigned to multiage classrooms would not choose this structure again (Veeman, 1995).

Administrators in schools with multiage classes report difficulties with parents, scheduling, and budget constraints. Accommodating multiage classes into the school schedule can be a difficult task at best, since multiage classrooms need large, uninterrupted blocks of time

for activities. It is especially difficult to achieve breaks in the class schedule for physical education, music, art, and library. Furthermore, multiage classrooms must have teaching materials that cover the individual level of each student represented. These materials are generally hands-on in nature and may be reusable or consumable. Traditionally, teachers have been the ones to make up for the lack of materials by purchasing the materials themselves. Therefore, administrators of schools with multiage classroom configurations must be prepared to allocate funds to provide students with the basic teaching and learning materials (Daniel, 1995) Multiage classrooms do not fit neatly into the traditional organizational plan for schools. Parents, educators, and administrators involved should be prepared to work through some tough issues and not underestimate the difficulties that innovative programs, such as multiage education, can pose on all involved (Grant, 1991).

Do the advantages outweigh the c concerns?

While supporters of multiage educational programs cite advanced academic achievement for students, other researchers report different conclusions. Rule found that nearly all students placed in a multiage classroom were chosen because of their high achievement scores. This was done to reduce the level of achievement disparity in the multiage classroom (Grant, 1993). One study reports that schools implementing multiage classroom structures have not proven to be detrimental to standardized test scores; most multiage grouped students score as well or better than those in single-grade programs (Nye, 1995).

Student achievement in the area of social or affective domain show positive growth. Multiage classroom settings are credited with improved student attitude toward school, fewer discipline referrals, increased attendance, improved peer relations among students, and improved attitude toward work (Nye, 1995).

Joseph Allen concluded, during the summation of his study on multiage classroom settings, that there are benefits as well as negatives for students involved and that both multiage and single-age situations have strengths and weaknesses that affect different types of students in different ways (Allen, 1 989).

Some research supports the idea of advanced academic achievement of students in multiage classrooms: Kasten, 1993, cited gains in the area of student social behaviors (Nye, 1995). However, these factors must be weighed carefully against effects on parents, educators, and administrators before a well-functioning, single-age structure school decides to implement the multiage classroom configuration.

Summary

Some research supports the positive theories that students in multiage classroom settings make higher progress in areas of academia, self-esteem, and socialization skills than in single-age groupings. In fact research shows overwhelmingly and uniformly that students make considerable advancement in social and affective skills in the multiage classroom.

Teachers and parents benefit from a growing relationship as a result of continuity. For this educational endeavor to flourish, individual teachers should be able to decide if they want to partake in a multiage classroom setting. Undoubtedly this type of structure inceases the workload of the teacher. Therefore, teachers who enter willingly into this new endeavor are more likely to be successful in the program. It is furthermore imperative that teachers who find themselves teaching in a multiage classroom need to observe and collaborate with experienced teachers. This form of cognitive training or coaching will be insightful and informative, since little multiage classroom training at the college level exists. There is a need for additional planning and preparation time for instruction; curriculum must be

designed and aligned to fit the different education needs and levels which will exist in a multiage classroom. Because of this, there needs to be daily time allotment for teachers to handle lesson planning and preparation, record keeping, grading, and conferencing with parents.

There is an additional expense for teaching materials on many developmental levels. Administrators of such programs must be prepared to supply teachers with basic supplies and materials which might mean reallocation of funds.

There are additional concerns about multiage classrooms that affect parents, educators, and administrators. Multiage classrooms do not fit into the traditional organizational plan for present school timetables. Major disadvantages of this system are that parents are concerned about having their children assigned into these classrooms for various reasons: increased teacher workloads, and administrative scheduling difficulties.

In summary, if educators and administrators follow the swing of the educational pendulum from single-age classrooms to multiage classrooms and implement such a structure without securing the advantages and improving upon the concerns, American education will have come full circle without learning a thing in the process and without improving the education of our children.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Dr Rosemarie Kolstad, Elementary Education, PO Box 3011, Texas A&M University-Commerce, Commerce, TX 75429-3011.

References

Allen, J.P. (1989). Social Impact of Age Mixing and Age Segregation in Schools: A Context-Sensitive Investigation. Journal of Educational Psychology, 81, 408-416.

Daniel, T.C. & K.W. Terry (1995). Multiage Classrooms by Design: Beyond the One-Room School. California: Corwin Press, Inc.

Ellis, A.K. & J.T. Fouts (1996). Handbook of Educational Terms and Applications, Eye on Education, Inc. 148-150.

Gaustad, J. (1994). Nongraded Education: Overcoming Obstacles to mplementing the Multiage Classroom. Eugene, OR: Oregon School Study Council. (ED 379 744).

Grant, Jim (1991). Developmental Education in the 1990's: 92 of the Questions Frequently Asked by Teachers & Parents, With Answers That Will Clarify the Issues & Help Children Now. Rosemont, NJ: Modern Learning Press.

Grant, Jim (1993). Multiage Classrooms: The Ungrading of America's Schools. New Hampshire: The Society For Developmental Education.

Kasten, W. and B.K. Clarke (1993). The Multi-Age Classroom: A Family of Learners. New York: Richard C. Owen Publishers, Inc.

Miller, B.A. (1994). Children at the Center: Implementing the Multiage Classroom. Oregon: A Best-Evidence Synthesis. Review of Educational Research, 65(4): 319-381.

Miletta, M.M. (1996). A Multiage Classroom: Choice & Possibility. New Hampshire: Heinemann.

NEA Teacher-to-Teacher Books (1995). Multi-age Classrooms. West Haven, CT. NEA Teacher-to-Teacher Books.

Nye, B. (1995). Are Multiage/Nongraded Programs Providing Students' With A Quality Education? Some Answers From The School Success Study. Nashville, TN: Center of Excellence for Research in Basic Skills. (ED 384 998).

Osin, L. and A. Lesgold (1996). A Proposal for the Reengineering of the Educational System. Review of Educational Research, 66(4): 621-656.

Veeman, S. (1995). Cognitive and Noncognitive Effects of Multigrade and Multi Age Classes: A Best-Evidence Synthesis. Review of Educational Research, 65(4):319-381.

~~~~~~~~~

By Rosemarie Kolstad and Andrea McFadden

Dr. Rosemarie Kolstad, Professor, Department of Elementary Education, Texas A& M University-Commerce. Ms.Andrea McFadden, Elementary Teacher.

Copyright of Journal of Instructional Psychology is the property of Educational Innovations and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.
~~~~~~~~~