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## Literacy in the multiage classroom : a review of the research

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## Literacy in the multiage classroom : a review of the research

### Abstract

Multi-age grouping has a long history and is once again being studied as a viable alternative to the age-graded education model. Research indicates that multi-age programs are academically effective as well as being beneficial in promoting feelings of self-efficacy in students. Our society has changed since the inception of the age-graded model and teachers today are looking at multi-age education as a way to meet the diverse needs of their students. Successful multi-age programs have similar characteristics, but each program needs to be designed to meet the needs of the community it serves. Specific teaching strategies, materials, and assessment methods, are needed for literacy instruction in the multi-age classroom.

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Multiage grouping has a long history and is once again being studied as a viable alternative to the age-graded education model. Research indicates that multiage programs are academically effective as well as being beneficial in promoting feelings of self-efficacy in students. Our society has changed since the inception of the age-graded model and teachers today are looking at multiage education as a way to meet the diverse needs of their students. Successful multiage programs have similar characteristics, but each program needs to be designed to meet the needs of the community it serves. Specific teaching strategies, materials, and assessment methods, are needed for literacy instruction in the multiage classroom.

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## Multiage 1

In 1996, driven by a desire to find a way for all my first-grade students to be successful, I embarked on a journey that led me to multiage education. My desire was propelled by the number of students in my classroom who were considered “failures” because they did not meet the academic expectations of my school district, especially in the area of reading. The emphasis seemed to be focused on a deficit view, looking at what the students could not do, rather than on what they could do and the progress they had made. Another concern was the number of students who were being referred for evaluation and possible special education placement. Equally troubling was the prospect of retaining students in first grade. As a teacher, I felt like I was failing to meet the needs of my students.

As part of our school improvement initiative, a small group of teachers joined together to study multiage education. Together with our principal, we began by examining our beliefs about how children learn. Based on our own experiences and the reading we had been doing, we developed the following list of beliefs:

Children learn and develop...

...best when their emotional and physical needs are met and they feel safe and secure.

...at their own pace through active, hands-on interactions.

...in an environment which is rich in materials, choices, and opportunities.

...at different rates from each other.

...at different rates in different areas.

...with experiences that are meaningful to them.

...through social interactions with others.

...in an environment free from anxiety and failure.

...best through the use of integrated curriculum (State of Iowa, Department of Education, 1997).

As we examined the literature on nongraded education and made visits to multiage classrooms, we found teachers who taught children rather than curriculum. What we saw were our beliefs reflected in practice in the multiage classroom. So what is multiage education, and what caused me to become motivated and energized to change the way I teach?

### Definition

Over the last few years teachers have expressed renewed interest in the concept of multiage education. Multiage grouping, nongraded education, family groupings, and continuous progress are some of the names given to the concept. But the term multiage is like many terms in education; the definition is dependent on the person who is defining it. A multiage classroom is a community of learners, where students of different ages and ability levels are purposefully grouped together without being labeled by grade level. Many people, including educators, mistakenly think of multiage education as just an organizational or grouping plan; however, multiage is also a philosophy of education, which requires educators to consider that all children are unique, and that they need different methods of instruction to reach their maximum potential (Anderson & Pavan, 1993; Cushman, 1990; Pavan, 1992). Multiage grouping can be used with all ages, but some educators believe it is especially appropriate during the primary years where it enables children to move at their own pace through a developmentally appropriate curriculum (Gaustad, 1992).

History

Multiage education was an accepted educational practice in the United States until classification of students by age began in the mid-1800's (Anderson & Pavan, 1993; see also Bingham, Dorta, McClaskey, & O'Keefe, 1995). In the mid-1800's the new idea of mass public education and a wave of immigrants to the United States created the need for a way to handle large numbers of students. Horace Mann is credited with bringing the Prussian age graded model to the United States following his trip to Europe in 1843. Five years later, in 1848, the Quincy Grammar School was opened in Boston. This school is considered to be the first in the United States which grouped students in grade levels according to age (Anderson & Pavan, 1993; Goodlad & Anderson, 1987). Support for the graded model grew as educators attempted to bring order and sequence to the schools, and it probably was helpful to teachers who at that time had little formal training. About that same time textbook companies were coming out with sequenced graded textbooks. One such example is the *McGuffey Eclectic Readers* published in 1836. As early as 1868 however, the graded concept was being debated, and in 1872 comparisons of nongraded versus graded programs were beginning to appear. John Dewey voiced his opposition to the graded school model in the early 1900's (Anderson & Pavan; Nye, Cain, Zaharias, Tollett, & Fulton, 1995).

According to Stainback and Stainback (1984, as cited by W. Miller, 1995), the current age graded school organization plan is based on three assumptions: that children who are the same chronological age are ready to learn the same objectives, that all children require the same amount of time to learn a predetermined content, and that all children can master the assigned



objectives for a specific grade level at the same rate in all curricular areas. The problem with those assumptions is that they are not true for all children (W. Miller, 1995). As a result, children who do not meet the expectations of the age-graded structure are often placed in special classes. Not only does the age-graded system fail to meet the needs of some children, it also does not take into consideration what we currently know about child development. For example, we know that in first grade there is often a four-year span of mental age development. We also know that children progress at different rates of development in different subject areas, and that age-grouping does not reflect real-life (W. Miller). Miller (p. 28) cites *A Nation at Risk* (1983) which recommends, "that placement, and grouping of students, as well as policies, should be guided by students' academic progress and instructional needs rather than by rigid adherence to age".

After a long period of time in which there were few multiage classrooms in this country, the concept of multiage grouping was reborn in the 1960's following the publication of *The Nongraded Elementary School* by John Goodlad and Robert Anderson in 1959. But many of those nongraded programs in the 1960's and 1970's failed. Goodlad and Anderson published a revised edition of their book in 1987 which, along with research and studies of successful multiage programs, is guiding new interest in nongraded education (Gaustad, 1992; McClay, 1996). The states of Kentucky and Oregon are evidence of the renewed interest in multiage. In the early 1990's, both states passed legislation which mandates continuous progress nongraded primary schools as part of their school improvement plans (Gaustad, 1992; Pavan, 1992).

Value for today

This renewed interest in nongraded education may be due to several factors. In the forward to the book *Exploring the Multiage Classroom* (Bingham, et al., 1995) Charles Rathbone states, "...times have changed...children of increased diversity are coming to school" (p. ix). Children do come to school today with widely differing abilities and varied early childhood experiences, and schools are called upon to meet the individual needs in this increasingly diverse population. Today multiage is one way to respond to the changing and varied world of our children. Multiage classrooms are seen by some as an answer to those diverse needs because the multiage philosophy not only expects diversity in the classroom, it celebrates diversity (Bacharach, Hasslen, & Anderson, 1995; Bingham, et al., 1995). The benefits of multiage, "rest on the assumption that the differences within a group of children can be a source of rich intellectual and social benefits" (Katz, 1995, p.1).

The best reason for making the change to multiage teaching is to provide developmentally appropriate instruction for all children (Black, 1993). Vito Perrone, director of teacher education at Harvard University, admonishes us that children need to learn at their own pace in order to gain self-confidence in their ability as learners. Perrone feels that freedom from failure is the most compelling reason to implement multiage programs, because in multiage classrooms students move along a continuum of learning at their own pace (Black, 1993).

The stable community environment that multiage provides is another reason for change. In the multiage classroom one will find children from at least two traditional grade levels and sometimes three grade levels. Most multiage

## Multiage 6

programs ask parents to make a commitment to keep their child in the program for the two to three year span of the class. This means, for example, that a child entering a multiage 1-2-3 program as a "first grader" would stay with the same teacher for three years. There is also a continuity of classmates as only the oldest one-third of the class leaves each year and is replaced by new students. This means that multiage provides a stable community environment where students, teachers, and parents stay together for more than one school year. Teachers get to know their students very well and are able to recognize and address the diverse needs, interests, and learning rates of students. Teachers and students find the beginning of the new school year much easier as teachers already know many of their students, the students already know many of their classmates and teachers, and the experienced students help the newcomers learn the expectations and routines of the classroom. Children who return to the same teacher and classroom are not anxious about starting a new school year; they already know what to expect. The children benefit from being part of a classroom community for more than one year as teachers are able to help them gain confidence in their ability to learn. Parents also benefit from having a long term relationship with one teacher (Kasten, 1998; McIntyre, et al., 1996).

Bacharach, et al., (1995) cite the increasing complexity of our world in the 1990's as a factor influencing the consideration of nongraded programs. The educational system is confronted daily with issues of technology, mobility, changing family structures, and ethnic diversity. These issues make for constant change in our society and create a need for people who are able to adapt to change and diversity. Multiage is able to serve that diverse population in such a way that everyone has the opportunity to succeed. Kasten (1998) proposes a

purpose for education that highlights effective human interaction and dynamics stating that the long term goal of education is to produce happy adults who can earn a productive living, be critical consumers, make responsible decisions, and be life-long learners. Some educators see multiage classrooms as a way to meet these goals with its curriculum and community learning environment that nurtures all students to reach their highest potential.

Kasten (1998) points out that there are both academic and social benefits to multiage classrooms. These academic and social benefits are interrelated as the social development impacts on academic development and academic development impacts on social development. Thus the two continue to develop and grow in a spiral fashion. Kasten has grouped these academic and social benefits into six areas.

Interaction or role theory is the first area. In the multiage classroom the older children are often looked to as teachers, tutors, or role models by the younger less experienced children. This benefits both groups of students as the older children work hard to live up to the expectations of others and the "youngsters" have a wealth of teachers available. Vygotsky (1978, as cited in Kasten, 1998) describes the learning and development that take place when learners of different ability levels interact. Learners who are able and ready can provide scaffolding for those who are nearly ready which supports their learning in ways they would not have been able to accomplish alone. This type of supported learning takes place naturally in the multiage classroom.

The second area is related to the first, and that is the benefits that come from cross-aged tutoring. Before a student can teach what they have learned, the concept must be internalized, and the student must be able to express what

they have learned. The act putting that concept into language and expressing to someone else is intellectually challenging. Therefore, the act of teaching becomes a powerful learning tool for the students. The students who tutor not only gain academic benefits, but also gain confidence and self-esteem.

The third area of benefits that Kasten (1998) cites is the decrease in aggressive and competitive behavior and the increase in caring and nurturing behavior among children of different ages in the nongraded classroom. Studies by Katz (1995) also report an increase in helping behaviors among children in multiage classrooms.

Kasten's fourth area relates results of research studies that document increased self-esteem, confidence, and positive attitudes in students participating in multiage classrooms. These positive attitudes may be related partly to the decrease in competitive and aggressive behaviors and partly to the use of role theory and modeling in multiage classrooms. Kasten recommends that schools would do well to document the effect of multiage grouping on student's attitudes through the use of attitude survey assessments.

A very interesting benefit to multiage classes, and Kasten's fifth point, is that every child gets a turn to experience what it is like to be the younger, the older, and in three year classes the middle child in the classroom family. This change in birth order in the classroom is not possible at home in the family or in the graded classroom. But in the multiage classroom each child can be a younger, who receives help and nurturing. They can also have an experience as an older, who is the helper, teacher, nurturer, "big" kid. And in classes that span three years, each child also gets to be a middle child, who can sometimes be the helper and at other times receive nurturing. These birth order

experiences allow the children to see how they are moving along the continuum of growth and development.

Kasten's sixth area has to do with retention and promotion issues. Child development specialists have told us that children do not develop in smooth predictable ways (Gaustad, 1992). We also know that retention does not help because repeating the same curriculum will not necessarily help. Multiage offers an alternative to retention and social promotion. Because multiage programs allow children to progress along the learning continuum at their own pace, a child can stay in a multiage classroom for an extra year but not be forced to simply repeat curriculum. Instead children will continue on from where they left off the year before in a familiar environment with many friends. The continuous progress format of multiage allows students to progress as far as they are able, and many multiage programs also offer students the opportunity to be promoted early if necessary.

### Disadvantages

There are, however, disadvantages to multiage grouping. Katz (1995) cautions educators that multiage teachers must be prepared to teach social skills so that the "younger" are not overwhelmed by the older or more competent students. In order to maximize the social benefits of multiage the students need coaching and demonstration in how to help and nurture each other. This social skills training benefits students because by helping others they build confidence in their own skills. Older children also need training in ways to kindly tell younger students that they are busy and will help them as soon as they finish their own tasks.

Teacher training is another area that makes moving to multiage difficult.

Teachers need a thorough knowledge of child development, integrated curriculum, and instructional strategies to make multiage programs successful (Gaustad, 1992). Teachers need to know what to do, why they are doing it, and when it needs to be done, and they need the confidence to explain what they are doing to parents, other staff members, and administrators (Elliot, 1997). The on-going assessment needed to drive the child-centered continuous progress curriculum can also be daunting to teachers.

Another difficult area for teachers of multiage classes is the need for adequate preparation time. Planning for an integrated curriculum, the many small groups, and the on-going assessment and record keeping cause multiage teachers to need large blocks of planning time. If multiage educators team teach they need even more time to plan together. Lack of adequate planning time for teachers is one of the biggest stumbling blocks in maintaining a successful multiage program (Gaustad, 1992).

Grade leveled schedules, curriculum guides, text books, and testing standards also pose problems for multiage educators. Wall (1994) relates that graded textbooks are only occasionally used in her multiage classroom. These texts are brought out when a particular chapter compliments an integrated unit of study. Children are able to buddy read the text as one method of research. Because multiage teachers do not rely on text books, the cost of supplementary materials can be a problem for many school districts (Cushman, 1990; Gaustad, 1992).

Multiage programs require the understanding and support of administrators, staff, and parents in order to be successful (Gaustad, 1992). Multiage teachers must have faith in their ability to take grade leveled

curriculum and standards and fit them into an integrated continuous progress program, and then they must continually keep all parties informed as to what they are doing, why they are doing it, and how it is working.

### The time is right

Even with these difficulties, the concept of multiage education has shown resilience over time. Historically, concerns about retention and social promotion have been the catalyst for development of nongraded programs (Guitierrez & Slavin, 1992; Tanner & Decotis, 1995). Most educators believe that now is the time for multiage, due to knowledge gained from recent educational research and an atmosphere of change in school administration. The current interest in nongraded education reflects concerns in other educational issues such as: restructuring the school day, the use of interrelated curriculum themes, early childhood research findings (limited use of formal testing and retention, end of use of letter grades, thematic units, active learning, and alternative grouping strategies), and teacher empowerment in school reform (Mackey, Johnson, & Wood, 1995).

Teachers' interest in multiage stems also from their empowerment to make decisions concerning school organization patterns that were formerly left to administrators. This is a result of the school reform movement. Joint decision making has given teachers the freedom and the responsibility to determine the best way to meet children's needs (Mackey, et al., 1995). Teachers need to work together with administrators and parents to study and create programs that are custom built for their school's specific needs. There is no one correct model for education. The community, school, teachers, parents, and students are all variables to be considered (Bacharach, et al., 1995). Teachers therefore, need



to research organizational and philosophical plans to determine what will best fit their students' needs.

### Research on academics

So what does the research reveal about how multiage meets students' academic needs? In 1992 Pavan explored the benefits of nongraded schools. Her research review examined 57 studies comparing academic achievement using standardized tests. Over 90% of the studies indicated that nongraded groups performed better (58%) or as well as (33%) the graded group in all comparisons. Only 9 percent of these studies showed nongraded as doing worse than the graded classes.

W. Miller (1995) reviewed studies by several researchers all of which found that a reduction of age range and students abilities (homogeneity) does not increase achievement. Miller also scrutinized the research on multiage classrooms by Pratt (1986, as cited in Miller, 1995) and Way (1981) which found no significant difference in any areas of academic achievement, but in the area of self-concept, happiness, and satisfaction multiage groups had higher scores. In these studies, Miller also found that there is a trend toward increased competition and aggression in the same age classes; whereas, the trend in multiage is toward increased harmony and acceptance. This relates to findings by Katz (1995) that nurturing behaviors increase among students in multiage classrooms.

Research by Nye, et al., (1995) compared scores on academic testing from graded schools and multiage programs. They reviewed the four areas of vocabulary, reading, language, and math. At the end of first grade, the graded schools outscored the nongraded in every category, but only the vocabulary

scores were statistically significant. At the end of second grade, the nongraded schools outperformed their graded counterparts in all four areas and all four scores were statistically significant. The third graders in nongraded classes outscored those in graded classes in three measures with two being statistically significant. Nongraded fourth graders scored higher in three areas but none was statistically significant. On a holistic writing assessment both third and fourth grade scores were statistically significant and favored multiage schools.

Mackey, et al., (1995) examined reading, writing, and self-esteem in their study of the cognitive and affective outcomes in a multiage classroom. They found statistically significant differences in all three of those areas which favored the multiage group. The difference occurred for bilingual classes as well as mainstreamed multiage classrooms.

The research indicates that multiage programs are not detrimental to academic test scores. In fact in most instances, nongraded students score as well as, or better than, single grade classroom students.

### How to change

So what does it take to have a successful multiage program? While each multiage program is unique, there seem to be some characteristics that are common to successful ones. The first common area is that of teacher beliefs. Multiage teachers believe in the value of diversity and the meeting of individual children's needs (Bacharach, et al., 1995). Multiage teachers believe in teaching children on their own continuum of learning rather than teaching curriculum to children (Stone, 1994-95). And multiage teachers passionately believe that what they are doing is good for children.

The second area has to do with skills that multiage teachers need to be

successful. Teachers in nongraded classrooms need good classroom management with rules and routines well established. These rules and routines provide a framework for daily classroom operations. The multiage classroom needs to be well ordered and organized, and the teacher needs a consistent plan for discipline (B. Miller, 1991). Lindauer, Petrie, Gray, and Vickers (1998) tell us that proactive discipline, which is less verbal, is a common characteristic of successful multiage teachers. They have found that verbal discipline seems to spread the disruption, whereas less verbal techniques such as proximity, facial expression, and moving to touch a child are more effective. These are old methods of classroom management, but successful multiage teachers seem to use them on a whole new level.

The next characteristic is that of collaboration. Multiage teachers need time to train and work together as a team, and part of that time is needed to develop a common philosophy. Another part of their training time together should be spent in developing teaching strategies which have been shown to be successful for multiage such as whole language, cooperative learning, use of integrated thematic units, use of hands on manipulatives, peer tutoring, team teaching, and authentic assessment. But the most important factor to the success of nongraded programs is that all multiage team members need a common planning time. This planning time needs to be of adequate length and frequency for organizational and curricular planning to be done. The individual multiage teacher carries most of the burden to make the nongraded classroom work, but having a team work effort is more effective (Lindauer, et al., 1998). The multiage team also needs to work together on scheduling. This team needs to be free to make a schedule that fits their needs.

## Curriculum

What does learning look like in a multiage classroom? Stone (1994-95) believes that an integrated thematic curriculum is necessary in the nongraded classroom. The thematic curriculum meets several needs for multiage. It allows for process learning, and it provides a unifying framework that allows children to work together in groups and practice skills at different levels. In the April 1998 issue of *Primary Voices K-6*, Lolli elaborates on how the content should be integrated into broad units which can be topical, thematic, or conceptual in nature. These units are inquiry units, where the students explore topics of interest which are related to the concept or theme. Much of the reading and writing for the day relates to the concept, and connections are made between school work and real life.

Davenport (1998) elaborates on inquiry cycles as being extended periods of time for children to have meaningful, self-directed learning. Inquiry cycles fit multiage well because they allow each child to work at his or her own pace and development level to be successful. They also allow the teacher the opportunity to meet individual needs. When using inquiry learning there is a need to use goals to guide daily work through the long term study. Students need to set their goals with teacher guidance. As the teacher and student discuss goals, the teacher can provide feedback to the student and help the student track their progress toward long term goals.

Many multiage educators recommend the use of a constructivist or process approach to learning (Stone, 1994-95; Lolli, 1998). Lolli believes that constructivism is especially appropriate for multiage because children are able create meaning from experiences and from the modeling of others going on

around them. The multiage classroom provides a wide variety of models for children to learn from, while the traditional age graded classroom deprives children of a variety of models. Multiage programs intentionally increase the diversity and heterogeneity of the class group, and they use those differences in experience, knowledge, and abilities as a resource for learning (Katz, 1995). Stone recommends that multiage teachers focus on social skills and broad academic areas such as reading, writing, and problem solving. Students then use these broad skills as tools to learn content through open-ended activities and projects where all students participate on their own level of development. This means that reading, writing, and mathematics are used in meaningful, real-life contexts.

Lolli (1998) discusses how children in multiage classroom are taught both content and skills within the context of the concept unit. Reading workshop becomes a time for learning both reading skills and using those skills to read for content knowledge. Each student is an accepted participant on their own level. Mini lessons might be literature or writing strategies or tools for research. The teacher uses small groups and individual conferences as times for individualized instruction.

### Teacher's role

The teacher's role in the multiage classroom is more as a facilitator of learning rather than as the one who imparts information. The teacher needs to know each student on a personal level and as a learner, because in multiage the focus is more on meeting the needs of each child rather than teaching a set curriculum. This entails a major effort on the part of the teacher to keep records of the progress of each child. Through conferencing and record keeping the

teacher gathers information needed to plan effectively for student learning needs. The job of the teacher becomes one of being the planner and guide, to nurture and support the learning process for each child (Stone, 1992-95). This is a difficult job as multiage teachers also strive to meet district and state curriculum and testing standards which are not always compatible with nongraded philosophy and teaching strategies.

### Student's role

The student's role also changes in the multiage classroom. Each child has the opportunity to develop and progress at his or her own pace, but this comes with added responsibility. Children in the multiage classroom must be more self-directed and responsible for their own learning (Davenport, 1998). Teachers and children need to work together to set goals which guide learning. Goals are set for individual children and for the whole group. Group goals need to be challenging for everyone, and all goals need to build on previous ones to encourage growth. Davenport shares thoughts by Lauritzen and Jaeger (1977, as cited in Davenport, p. 8) who suggest that goals should tell us what we want children to "know and be able to do," and goals should tell us "what schooling should accomplish." Multiage allows students to become independent learners who develop to their own maximum potential (Lolli, 1998).

### Literacy strategies that work

A multiage environment necessitates the use of child centered instructional practices. In the area of reading, whole language is often mentioned by multiage teachers as a good fit (Chapman, 1995). Perhaps this is because whole language focuses on what the students can do and the process of becoming literate. Whole language values what children already know and

the experiences they bring with them to the classroom. Whole language also values the social aspect of literacy learning. In the whole language classroom the teacher is a facilitator and students make many choices about their learning. Whole language teachers understand that the learning process takes time. Evaluation is seen as an ongoing process as students move along the continuum of literacy learning (Routman, 1991). All of the values of whole language are very supportive of the beliefs and values of multiage classrooms.

Whole language has many components which make up a balanced reading program. These components include reading aloud, shared reading, guided reading, independent reading, and opportunities to share and respond to reading. A balanced writing program includes writing aloud, shared writing, guided writing, independent writing, and opportunities to share and respond to writing. Each component is part of the daily reading and writing program. There are many opportunities for student choice, teacher demonstration and guidance, and student involvement and response. There is room for flexibility in whole language and a wide range of possibilities (Routman, 1991).

Reading workshop is another instructional practice that seems to be a good fit in the multiage classroom (Hovda, Kyle, & McIntyre, (Eds.), 1996). Reading workshop begins with a mini lesson which can be of a procedural nature, a strategic reading skill, or a literature lesson. Then children spend time selecting a book and reading quietly. Reading time is the longest part of reading workshop, and it is during this time that the teacher can conference with individuals or small groups. This is a good time for individualized teaching, goal setting, and assessment. Teachers and students need to keep conference logs. These logs focus on what the student can do and goals for continue growth.

These logs are excellent documentation of growth in reading and are valuable tools for discussing literacy development with parents at conferencing times. After reading time, students write in their logs and share. Sharing is very important to the community of readers. Students need to be taught how to share and how to be a good listener. This sharing and discussing of books seems to drive a love of reading for many students (P. Beed, personal communication, July 6, 1999).

Other multiage teachers have taken reading workshop and adapted it to fit their needs. Alexander (Hovda, et al., (Eds.), 1996) likes to begin her reading workshop by having children read aloud their own pieces of writing. This celebration of authors also includes teacher read aloud time. Read aloud time becomes a community building time in multiage. All students can participate at their own reading and writing level.

Literature circles are also used by some multiage teachers. Alexander (Hovda, et al., Eds., 1996) uses literature circles periodically throughout the year. Children form a literature group based on the title selected, the author, the subject, the theme, or the genre. This group meets during reading workshop time to discuss their reading and literary topics such as the author's style, character, setting, and plot. Literature circles are particularly adaptable to multiage because students of varying abilities can read different books on the same topic, theme, or genre, and have discussions about them. Book discussions add to children's understanding of literature. They get to view the topic from many different reader's perspectives and enjoy book in the company of friends (Bingham, et al., 1995).

Flexible grouping is mentioned frequently by multiage teachers.



Literature circles are one kind of flexible group, and guided reading groups are another type. Guided reading as directed by Fountas and Pinnell (1996) is one method of using small flexible groups for specific reading instruction. In guided reading groups the teacher works with a small group of students who are all at about the same reading level. The teacher chooses a new book and provides the introduction and support so that the children can be successful reading the text independently. After the reading, the teacher uses the text to teach a minilesson specific to those children's needs.

Stone (1994-95) goes so far as to say that small flexible groupings are the predominant instructional strategy in multiage classrooms. She believes that most class time should be spent in small groups, pairs, or independent study. These groups are formed on the basis of need or the interest of the children. She finds there is very little large group instruction.

Cunningham, Hall, and Defee (1991) present the four blocks approach as a way to achieve non-ability-grouped, multilevel literacy instruction. This approach to literacy instruction, which is being used by some multiage teachers, has four major components. The first block is writing, which is basically process writing or writer's workshop. Writing is included out of the authors' belief that one way children can learn to read is by writing and reading their own writing. The second block is the basal block or guided reading. This block is when the teacher exposes children to many types of literature, teaches comprehension strategies, and teaches children to read increasingly difficult text (Cunningham, Hall, & Sigmon, 1999). The third block is called real books or self-selected reading. Here the children get to choose what they read, and there is time to respond to and share about that reading. This time block also includes teacher

read aloud time. The fourth block is called working with words. In this block the children work on spelling and reading high frequency words and looking for patterns that let them spell and decode many other words with those patterns. A high frequency word wall and the making words activity are both a part of this time.

Writer's workshop seems to be the most common choice for the teaching of writing in the multiage class. Writer's workshop often begins with a mini-lesson on a needed writing skill. This lesson can be done in whole group or small group. Then writer's workshop continues as an individualized work time where the teacher works the room assisting as needed, conferencing and keeping records of children's progress. But a large portion of the writing in the multiage class is for authentic purposes. Writing is used as a tool for recording and communicating in math, science, social studies, reading, art, or music (Bingham, et al., 1995). Writer's workshop fits in the multiage classroom because everyone can participate at their own level of development.

### Materials

The teaching strategies that work for multiage classrooms require certain materials to support them. A wide variety of reading materials is probably the most important item on the list. Multiage classrooms need reading texts on a variety of levels of difficulty and in many genres to support the reading program. They also need content area materials for themes or inquiry cycles, but these can be borrowed from the school or public library. Multi-copy book sets are needed for use by small reading or interest groups (Lolli, 1998).

In other areas such as math and science, hands-on manipulative materials that are appropriate for various levels of learning are needed.

Resources are needed in many forms such as reference books, CD ROMs, and on-line sources. The children need access to a variety of paper and art supplies as they work on their many projects. Notebooks for journaling, note taking, and personal inquiry projects are also needed. All of these materials need to be organized and accessible to students. It is of great benefit if a way can be devised to share materials among the multiage classrooms (Lolli, 1998).

### Assessment

Assessment in the multiage classroom reflects the multiage philosophy such that all students are evaluated according to their own achievement and potential, and not in comparison to one another (Stone, 1994-95). Using the concept of continuous progress it is necessary to know each student's beginning level of achievement, their current level, and what they need to accomplish to reach their goals. As children make progress along the continuum, growth can be charted. Parents like being able to see what their children can do, and what goals come next on the continuum. Children also like the concreteness of the continuum (Arnold, Kidwell, & Rossman, 1998).

The progress report continuum is also a valuable tool to help teachers and students set short term goals. Record keeping and documentation of progress is a daily chore for the teacher. Class record sheets need to be kept for each objective. The teacher can then use the record sheet to form flexible grouping for needed instruction. Reading and writing conferences provide the teacher with plentiful information about goals and progress towards goals. Some teachers keep individual student conference folders. All progress recording sheets go in the file, and then later the information is transferred to the progress report form (Arnold, et al., 1998).

In their article on multiage assessment, Arnold et al. (1998) discuss how their school uses information from repeated tasks for assessment. These are tasks which students repeat frequently, and they show growth over time. Examples of repeated tasks are journal writing, sight word reading, writing of most important words, spelling of 30 high frequency words, videotapes of students reading orally, and math activities.

The information from these tasks is gathered into student portfolios. Students keep their work in a collection file, and once a week there is time set aside for selection of work to go in the portfolio. The portfolio contains two folders. One folder is for repeated tasks and teacher choices, and the other folder is for student choices (Arnold et al. 1998). Portfolios enable children to see their own growth and progress, and they are powerful tools to use when conferencing with parents (Stone, 1994-95).

Arnold et al. (1998) encourage teachers to have frequent communication with parents. The authors suggest use of daily homework notebooks. The students write down assignments each day, and parents sign them when homework is done at night. This school also does parent - teacher conferences three times during the school year. Parents feel that they are a valued part of the multiage classroom community when they kept informed in these ways.

### Summary

Multiage grouping has a long history and is once again being scrutinized as a viable alternative to the age-graded education model. Teachers, empowered by the school reform movement, are looking at multiage grouping in hopes that by restructuring the primary grades all children will be enabled to reach their highest potential. Multiage educators are teaming new research on

best practice and educational strategies with multiage philosophy to make nongraded programs more successful today than ever before. Current research, such as that done by Pavan (1992), Miller (1995), and Nye, et al. (1995), indicates that multiage programs are academically effective as well as being beneficial in promoting feelings of self-efficacy in students.

Our society has changed since the inception of the age-graded model and schools today must change to meet the diverse needs of the students. Multiage grouping allows the teacher to focus on the individual needs of the children in the classroom. Multiage classrooms are noted for having an atmosphere of caring and support that comes from the community of teachers, students, parents, and administrators working together. Multiage education allows children to move along a continuum of learning at their own pace, in an environment free from anxiety and failure. As teachers search for ways to help an increasingly diverse population of students be successful, they need to explore multiage education.

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# The Reading Teacher

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