

A STUDY TO DETERMINE WHICH FACTORS CONTRIBUTE
TO THE IMPLEMENTATION OF A SUCCESSFUL
PRIMARY MULTIAGE/NONGRADED PROGRAM

by

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ABSTRACT

Child growth and development pedagogy suggests that not all children are ready to learn the same thing, at the same time, in the same way. Multiage/nongraded programs allow pupils to advance from one concept or skill level to the next as they are ready, regardless of age or grade, which results in continuous progress. Multiage/nongraded education has a solid foundation of research and experience to support its use. However, many questions still exist regarding the factors that contribute to the implementation of a successful primary multiage/nongraded program.

The purpose of this ethnographic study was to identify the (a) critical attributes of a successful multiage/nongraded program, (b) strategies necessary for successful implementation, (c) inservice training needed by teachers, (d) obstacles encountered during implementation, (e) advantages and disadvantages of a multiage/nongraded program for students, and (f) advantages and disadvantages of

a multiage/nongraded program for teachers. Data from 58 teachers of primary multiage classes in a large public school district in central Florida were collected during the 1995-96 school year using focus group interviews. An Interview Guide and a demographic questionnaire were developed to help gather data. Data collection procedures for this ethnographic study utilized a series of focus groups, field notes, and audiotape recordings. Data from the interviews were categorized, analyzed, interpreted, and summarized.

Two of the critical attributes of a multiage/nongraded program discussed in this study were developmentally appropriate practices and continuous progress. Other critical attributes included authentic assessment, team teaching, and varied instructional strategies such as integrated thematic teaching and whole language.

Implementation strategies discussed were the decision-making process involved in choosing to implement the multiage/nongraded program, the selection of the multiage teacher, professional development activities, student selection, and parental involvement. A large portion of the study was

devoted to a discussion of the obstacles encountered during implementation of the multiage/nongraded program.

Advantages and disadvantages of a multiage setting for students and teachers were discussed in the review of literature and in the data analysis of participants' responses during the interviews.

Implications for practice were included. A list of recommendations for future study was also included.

DEDICATION

This work is lovingly dedicated to

my Mom and Dad, Doris and John Hils,
and my sister and brother-in-law, Lynne and Billy May
who gave me my "roots and wings",

my husband, Jerry Osborne,
and my daughter and son-in-law, Penny and Lee Dockery,
who gave me support and encouragement,

and

my grandson, Jordan Tyler Osborne,
and my granddaughter, JennaLee TaraAnn Dockery,
who are my shining stars
and our hope for the future!

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES	xi
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CHAPTER I - NATURE AND SCOPE OF THE STUDY

Introduction	1
Statement of the Problem	4
Definition of Terms	4
Limitations of the Study	8
Assumptions of the Study	9
Significance of the Study	10
Conceptual Framework	11
Purpose of the Study	16
Research Questions	16
Population	17
Data Collection and Instrumentation	18
Organizational Design	18

CHAPTER II - REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Introduction	20
History of Graded and Nongraded Programs in the United States	21
Effects of Grade Level Retention on Students	26
Effects of Mixed-age Grouping	
Social Benefits for Students	30
Cognitive Benefits for Students	32
Disadvantages for Students	34
Advantages for Teachers	34
Disadvantages for Teachers	36
Studies Comparing Graded and Nongraded Programs	36

Critical Attributes of a Successful Multiage/ Nongraded Program	
Developmentally Appropriate Practice	41
Continuous Progress	43
Varied Instructional Strategies	
Constructivist Theory/Active/ Hands-On Learning	45
Integrated Curriculum/Thematic Teaching	46
Whole Language	47
Hands-On Mathematics	48
Cooperative Learning	49
Peer Tutoring	50
Learning Centers	51
Flexible Grouping	52
Multiple Intelligences	53
Authentic Assessment/Reporting Progress	54
Team Teaching and/or Team Planning	56
Implementation Strategies for a Successful Multiage/Nongraded Program	
Making the Decision to Implement a Multiage/ Nongraded Program	58
Planning the Change to a Multiage/ Nongraded Program	
Teacher Selection	61
Inservice Training	66
Student Selection	68
Curriculum	69
Parental Involvement and Communication	71
Leadership Support	71
Problems and Issues Encountered During Implementation	72
Summary	73

CHAPTER III - METHODOLOGY

Introduction	77
Qualitative Research Methods	78
Statement of the Problem	80
Population	80
Instrumentation	81
Focus Group Interviews	83
Role of the Researcher	88

Analysis of Data	89
Summary	91

CHAPTER IV - DATA ANALYSIS

Introduction	93
History of Multiage/Nongraded Programs in School District	93
A Composite of a Multiage Teacher in School District	95
Results	
Research Question 1	110
Research Question 2	120
Research Question 3	127
Research Question 4	136
Research Question 5	138
Research Question 6	141
Summary	145

CHAPTER V - SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Statement Of The Problem	148
Population	148
Data Collection and Instrumentation	149
Summary and Discussion of the Findings	
Questionnaire.....	150
Research Question 1	151
Research Question 2	153
Research Question 3	155
Research Question 4	156
Research Question 5	157
Research Question 6	158
Conclusions	160
Implications and Recommendations for Practice	164
Recommendations for Future Research	166

APPENDICES

A Interview Guide	170
B Questionnaire	173
C Memorandum to Principals	175
D Letter to Teachers	177

LIST OF REFERENCES	179
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LIST OF TABLES

1. FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS OF MULTIAGE TEACHERS	86
2. AGE AND SEX OF FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS.....	97
3. EDUCATIONAL DEGREE LEVEL OF FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS	98
4. TOTAL YEARS OF TEACHING EXPERIENCE OF FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS.....	99
5. NUMBER OF YEARS OF TEACHING EXPERIENCE IN A MULTIAGE SETTING	100
6. AREAS OF TEACHING CERTIFICATION OF FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS	102
7. TRADITIONAL GRADE LEVELS TAUGHT BY FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS.....	104
8. A COMPARISON OF THE AREAS OF TEACHING CERTIFICATION AND THE CHOICE TO CONTINUE IN A MULTIAGE SETTING	105

CHAPTER I

NATURE AND SCOPE OF THE STUDY

Introduction

“The organization of schooling appears to proceed as if we had no relevant knowledge regarding the development of children and youth” (Goodlad, 1984, p. 323). Child growth and development pedagogy suggests that not all children are ready to learn the same thing, at the same time, in the same way. Yet legislatures and school boards specify what all students will be taught and expected to learn at each grade level. Regardless of what students bring to the school setting, they are expected to conform to the demands of this structured environment and inflexible curriculum rather than having their needs met. When students do not attain these pre-determined grade level skills and concepts, they are retained. The following year they are presented with the same grade level curriculum regardless of their prior knowledge or developmental readiness. It is assumed that the children have

failed, rather than that the system has failed to meet their needs.

Graded education is based on the assumption that students of the same chronological age “acquire similar knowledge in the same way at the same time” (Bacharach, Hasslen, & Anderson, 1995, p. ix). Teachers in these classrooms impart a prescribed body of knowledge to students on a predetermined timeline. In contrast, a multiage/nongraded program focuses on developmentally appropriate curricula. In these settings, teachers “can provide a wide range of activities to meet a diversity of abilities and interests and can accept a variety of performance competencies as valid” (Bacharach et al., 1995, p. ix). Multiage/nongraded programs allow pupils to advance from one concept or skill level to the next as they are ready, regardless of age or grade, which results in continuous progress. Multiage programs utilize developmentally appropriate practices to meet individual needs and ensure the success of all students. Multiage/nongraded programs celebrate differences in individuals--their rates of

learning, learning styles, interests, personalities, and backgrounds. Ostrow (1995) stated that multiage classrooms:

Demonstrate what children are able to do. . . .They also break down barriers of age and gender. . . .Children learn to respect each other as individuals. . . .Children progress at their own rate. . . .serve as one learning approach that encourages teachers to look at children as individuals. . . .feeling of community. . . .and respect. (p. 4-5)

Multiage/nongraded education is not a new concept. It has a solid foundation of research and experience to support its use. The vast majority of educators and parents who have worked with it are enthusiastic. However, nongraded primary education is often met with resistance from those who have not yet experienced it. Research shows that it is human nature to approve the structure with which one is most familiar. Therefore, the task is to help others become as comfortable with nongradedness as they are with the traditional graded approach. There are many educators and others who still have important questions about the critical attributes of a multiage/nongraded program and the strategies most necessary for successful implementation. This study was undertaken to address those questions.

Statement of the Problem

This study sought to identify the (a) critical attributes of a successful multiage/nongraded program, (b) strategies necessary for successful implementation of the program, (c) inservice training needed by teachers to implement a successful program, (d) obstacles encountered during implementation, (e) advantages and disadvantages of a multiage/nongraded program for students, and (f) advantages and disadvantages of a multiage/nongraded program for teachers.

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of clarification, the following definitions were used throughout the study:

1. Ability Grouping/Tracking -- Ability grouping and tracking are forms of grouping that are characterized by educators making some rather global judgment about how smart students are based on IQ and past performance (O'Neil, 1992).
2. Alternative Assessment -- Alternative assessment refers to direct examination of student performance on

significant tasks that are relevant to life outside of school rather than a score on a multiple-choice or standardized test. The focus is on processes (i.e., learning logs and self-assessment checklists), products (i.e., diaries, portfolios, exhibits, and journals), and performances (i.e., videotapes and taped readings) of students (Worthen, 1993). The tasks are frequently open-ended and judgment is required to evaluate the level of performance (Davis, 1992).

3. Combination Class/Split Class/Multigrade Grouping --

The term multigraded refers to the teaching of more than one grade level in the same classroom, retaining grade level designations, and teaching a separate curriculum to each group of students (Gaustad, 1992b). The terms combination class, split class, and multigrade grouping are used interchangeably in this study.

4. Constructivist Theory/Active/Hands-On Learning --

The constructivist theory suggests that learning is an active process in which prior knowledge, interests, and

self-motivated purposes play major roles in learning (Ganapole, 1989). Constructivists believe that human beings acquire knowledge by building it from the inside through interaction with the environment (Kamii, Manning, & Manning, 1991).

5. Continuous Progress -- When children move along a continuum from easier to more difficult material at their own, varying rates of learning, they are making continuous progress (Gaustad, 1992b).
6. Developmentally Appropriate Practices -- Developmentally appropriate practices are those strategies implemented by school personnel which are age and individual appropriate (Bredekamp, 1987). Age appropriateness is based on the universal and predictable sequences of growth that have been documented through human development research. Individual appropriateness takes into consideration the unique patterns of growth, personality, learning styles, and culture of each child.

7. Flexible Grouping -- Flexible grouping is defined as the frequent reorganizing of children for specific and temporary purposes such as skill needs, interests, and/or learning styles (Gaustad, 1992a).
8. Looping -- Looping is a term used to describe a grouping practice in which a single-grade class stays together like a family and is promoted with the teacher for two and sometimes three years (Grant, Johnson, & Richardson, 1995).
9. Multiage/Nongraded/Ungraded Grouping -- Nongraded grouping is the practice of teaching children of different ages and ability levels together without dividing them or the curriculum into steps labeled by grade designations (Gaustad, 1992b). The terms multiage, nongraded, and ungraded are used interchangeably in this study.
10. Primary -- Primary refers to that part of the elementary school program in which children are enrolled from the time they begin school until they are ready to enter fourth grade (Burruss & Fairchild, 1993). Generally,

primary students are those students who are enrolled in kindergarten, first, second, and third grades and are 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9 years of age.

Limitations of the Study

The scope of this study was limited by the following:

1. The participants in this study consisted of instructional personnel who were employed as teachers of public school primary multiage classes in a large central Florida school district during the 1995-96 school year.
2. Responses used in data analyses were elicited from the participants through means of focus group interviews and a demographic questionnaire.
3. This study was limited to those school district personnel identified as teachers of primary multiage classes and any generalizations or inferences beyond this population should be made only after careful consideration of the conditions associated with the characteristics of these classroom teachers.

4. There is no school district definition for a multiage/nongraded program, therefore, the identification of multiage classes was determined by a building level administrator.

Assumptions of the Study

Several assumptions were made within the context of this study:

1. This research was based on the assumption that the critical attributes identified in the review of literature were important to the implementation of a successful multiage/nongraded program.
2. This research was also based on the assumption that the implementation strategies identified in the review of literature were necessary for a successful multiage/nongraded program.
3. It was assumed that teachers of multiage classes were knowledgeable regarding the concept of multiage/nongraded programs.
4. It was also assumed that all interviewees and survey respondents conveyed their honest opinions.

Significance of the Study

It was anticipated that:

1. The results of this study could provide a basis for making decisions regarding the appropriateness of implementing a multiage/nongraded program in other schools.
2. The critical attributes of a multiage/nongraded program would be identified for future implementation.
3. Those strategies which contributed to the successful implementation of a multiage/nongraded program could be identified and might be useful in future implementations of multiage/nongraded programs.
4. Those strategies which hindered the implementation of successful multiage/nongraded programs would be identified so they could be avoided in the future.
5. The results of this study could provide useful data to those persons planning professional development activities for instructional personnel who will be implementing multiage/nongraded programs.

Conceptual Framework

In a multiage/nongraded class, students make continuous progress rather than being promoted once a year. The emphasis is on what each child can do rather than on what each cannot do. The multiage program supports children as learners. Children in a multiage/nongraded class are supported socially also (Chase & Doan, 1994). A multiage/nongraded program provides stability and continuity for students. Because students and teachers spend at least two years together, less time is spent trying to determine teaching or learning styles and where to begin instruction. Multiage classes allow flexibility for students. Teachers expect individual differences and diversity is encouraged. Expectations are different for different students. Multiage classes also foster the growth of social skills through experience and group work. In a multiage class, the curriculum is integrated with a focus on the learner rather than on the content. A multiage organization de-emphasizes competition and fosters cooperation. It also provides a natural, real-life learning environment.

Findings from three main sources support the multiage/nongraded approach: research in child development and the learning process, research focusing on the effects of mixed-age grouping, and studies comparing graded and nongraded programs (Gaustad, 1992b).

According to Gaustad (1992b), research in child development has revealed that young children learn by doing and therefore, appropriate primary education programs provide children with opportunities for active, hands-on learning rather than passive listening or rote learning. In addition, she stated that children learn at different rates and therefore "education must be flexible in its expectations for the timing of children's achievement, rather than expecting all children to progress at a uniform rate" (p. 14).

Just as children differ in their rates of growth and learning, they also differ in their learning styles. Gardner (1983) noted that an ideal curriculum would afford opportunities for development of all seven intelligences rather than only the two most common--linguistic and mathematical/logical.

The results of brain research indicate that the brain organizes knowledge based on past experience and therefore information is more meaningful if taught in context. Children do not divide knowledge into subjects; their thinking is integrated. Skills presented through an integrated curriculum using projects and activities are learned much more easily (Gaustad, 1992b). The emotional state of the learner also affects learning. Children who are happy, secure, motivated, and in a noncompetitive environment are more likely to achieve success (Gaustad, 1992b).

Research on mixed-age grouping indicates that there are advantages for primary-level children, whatever their age and ability. In general, children naturally select friends from a wide age range. Interactions between age groups provide opportunities for children to practice leadership and followership skills, improve social skills, work cooperatively, master problem-solving skills, and learn from each other (Gaustad, 1992b). After reviewing studies comparing graded and nongraded programs, Miller (1990) concluded that multiage or multigraded classes are as effective as single-grade

classes in terms of academic achievement and superior in terms of student attitudes toward school and self.

One of the outcomes of the graded educational program is that teachers must make decisions each year regarding the promotion or retention of students for the next school year. According to Balow and Schwager (1990), research on the effectiveness of retention indicated that promotion has been more effective than retention for increasing achievement and fostering personal, social, psychological, and emotional development. Regardless of the research and potential for negative effects, pupils in single grade classes who have not mastered skills are retained due to grade level expectations (Holmes & Matthews, 1984).

Effective implementation of a successful multiage/nongraded program requires a new set of attitudes and skills, as well as an understanding of how children learn (Bacharach et al., 1995) and an understanding of specific instructional and implementation strategies. In order to assure success of a multiage/nongraded program, opportunities for appropriate inservice training are necessary before implementation. When

the state of Kentucky mandated multiage primary classes statewide, it also recognized the vital role that professional development training plays in innovation implementation and "a comprehensive program of professional development opportunity was implemented and financed under authority of the Kentucky Education Reform Act." (Settle, 1995, p. 2). Knowledge regarding the obstacles to successful implementation can be used during the planning phase of implementation and can therefore be avoided (Grant, Johnson, & Richardson, 1995).

This study was designed to determine the critical attributes of a multiage/nongraded program and the implementation strategies necessary for a successful multiage program. In addition, this study was designed to identify obstacles to successful implementation, identify appropriate staff development activities, and identify the advantages and disadvantages of multiage/nongraded programs for students and teachers.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to obtain information relative to teachers' perceptions regarding the factors which contributed to the implementation of a successful multiage/nongraded program at their work site. Specifically, this study was undertaken to determine how the decision to implement the multiage/nongraded program at each participant's work site was made, what planning and preparation for implementation occurred including staff development activities, and what instructional strategies were necessary for successful implementation. In addition, demographic information about the multiage teachers was gathered to determine if there was a relationship between personal characteristics, experience, or educational background and the implementation of a multiage/nongraded program.

Research Questions

The research questions which guided this study were:

1. What were the critical attributes of a successful primary multiage/nongraded program?

2. What strategies were necessary for the implementation of a successful primary multiage/nongraded program?
3. What problems were encountered during the implementation of a primary multiage/nongraded program?
4. What staff development activities were most effective in preparing teachers for implementing a primary multiage/nongraded program?
5. What were the advantages and disadvantages of a primary multiage/nongraded program for students?
6. What were the advantages and disadvantages of a primary multiage/nongraded program for teachers?

Population

The population for this study consisted of elementary public school teachers of primary multiage classes as identified by school administrators during the 1995-96 school year in a large central Florida school district who participated in focus groups and who completed a brief survey instrument.

Data Collection and Instrumentation

Based on the review of the literature, an Interview Guide for focus groups (Appendix A) was developed to gain participants' perceptions regarding the instructional strategies they considered to be an integral part of a successful multiage/nongraded program and the implementation strategies they felt were most necessary for a successful multiage/nongraded program. A short questionnaire (Appendix B) was developed to gain demographic information about the teachers in the primary multiage classrooms. Data collection procedures for this ethnographic study utilized a series of focus groups, field notes, and audiotape recordings. Data from the interviews were categorized, analyzed, interpreted, and summarized as described by Krueger (1994).

Organizational Design

Chapter I of this study dealt with the problem of the study and its significance. Chapter II presents a review of literature and research related to the problem of the study. Chapter III contains the method and procedures used during the research. Chapter IV contains the analysis of data received from the

participants. Chapter V contains the conclusions drawn as a result of this study and recommendations for future studies.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Introduction

This study sought to describe the critical attributes of successful multiage/nongraded programs and the implementation strategies that contributed to their success. In addition, this study was designed to identify obstacles to successful implementation, identify appropriate staff development activities, and identify the advantages and disadvantages of multiage/nongraded programs for students and teachers.

The review of related literature provides a summary of previous research and theory that formed the basis for this ethnographic study. The review of literature and related research focuses on the: (a) history of graded and nongraded programs, (b) current literature regarding the effects of grade-level retention, (c) current literature regarding the effects of mixed-age grouping, (d) studies comparing graded and

nongraded programs, (e) current literature regarding the critical attributes of a successful multiage program, and (f) literature regarding the implementation strategies of successful multiage/nongraded programs.

History of Graded and Nongraded Programs in the United States

Instruction in early institutions of learning was highly individualized. Classes, and in some cases whole schools, usually contained less than ten students. Teachers were not properly prepared to teach and the curriculum consisted of whatever they were able to teach.

Most often, the students were from wealthy families. Attendance was not required and so learning began where it was last interrupted (Goodlad & Anderson, 1987). However, these one-room schoolhouses offered certain attributes that were educationally sound. Children stayed with the same teacher and students for more than one year, which provided a stable environment. The differences in ages and abilities of the students allowed optimum collaboration. The more experienced students could assist younger ones and serve as role models, challenging them intellectually and socially. In

addition, there was no apparent ceiling on what content was taught, which benefited older students by design and younger students more incidentally (Kasten & Clarke, 1993).

Due to the low cost of schooling, the movement toward a free public education for everyone was encouraged, and the graded system was used to provide an orderly means of classifying the many children who would be coming to school. The driving force behind grade-level designations seemed to be efficiency. In addition, since teacher training was lacking, grade levels made it possible for each teacher to specialize in one grade-level curriculum and not have to learn the entire curriculum (Anderson & Pavan, 1993). The routinized and systematic approach of gradedness also made it easier to supervise teachers. Textbooks, such as The McGuffey Readers, which were introduced in 1836 and were graded through six levels, also had considerable impact on schools becoming graded.

In 1843, Horace Mann, following the example of apparently successful graded schools in Germany, advocated the graded school concept. The Quincy Grammar School in Boston

marked the emergence of the graded school in the United States in 1848. However, by 1868, educators had already begun to question the graded concept and its appropriateness for children (Anderson & Pavan, 1993). Among the most prominent of these educators was John Dewey, who challenged the graded educational practices by encouraging the use of individual experiences and the elimination of arbitrary classifications of grades, textbooks, and subject matter. At John Dewey's Laboratory School at the University of Chicago, which opened in 1893, interest-centered curriculum, pupil-initiated activities, and avoidance of comparisons of the work of children were advocated (Goodlad & Anderson, 1987).

Over the years, several attempts have been made to break down the graded structure. The Pueblo Plan in 1888 encouraged individual progress. The Batavia Plan employed additional teachers to give special help to slow learners, and older students were given additional help in Colorado. Both the Winnetka and Dalton Plans used an individualized task approach (Goodlad & Anderson, 1987). Anderson (1993) stated, "It is strange that the graded school, with its

overloaded, textbook-dominated curriculum, and its relatively primitive assumptions about human development and learning, has held its ground this long" (p. 73).

The graded structure persisted without much interference until 1957 when the successful launch of the Soviet satellite, named Sputnik, prompted a reexamination of the United States' educational system (Gaustad, 1992a). During the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, nongradedness and open education became a bandwagon on which educators jumped in an attempt to bring meaning and change to the existing educational system (Maling, 1990). The reform failed due to an inadequate understanding of the concept; a lack of training for teachers in developmental theories; a lack of practical training; a lack of support from the rest of the educational system including grade-level textbooks, mandatory standardized testing, and lack of planning time; a lack of support from parents and the community; and a move back to basics (Gaustad, 1992a).

The nongraded education movement of the 1990s differs from that of the 1960s. More recent research in child

