

# MULTIAGE GROUPING

## In support of *This We Believe* characteristic:

- High expectations for every member of the learning community
- Organizational structures that support meaningful relationships and learning

## What is Multiage grouping?

One of the hallmarks of the middle grades movement has been a penchant for flexible arrangements of time and organizational structure in an effort to effectively serve the needs of young adolescents. Multiage grouping (sometimes referred to as multigrade grouping) is an innovation that exemplifies this commitment to flexibility. As noted by George and Lounsbury (2000),

*Multiage grouping in middle schools is an organizational strategy in which students of different ages, ability levels, and interests are intentionally placed together on the same team. ... Another distinguishing feature of multiage grouping is the fact that students from different grade levels remain not only in the same house or on the same team, but that they frequently are grouped within their classes without regard to grade level. Students remain with the team of students and teachers for three years, beginning and ending their middle school careers on the same team. (p. 21)*

Multiage grouping allows students to interact across age groups and have long-term relationships with other students and teachers. In a multiage (multigrade) middle grades program, students from more than one grade level learn side by side. This strategy reduces the number of students assigned to a teacher or a team; hence, teachers and students are able to form much closer relationships (George & Lounsbury, 2000). In multiage classrooms, teachers structure learning activities to meet individual student needs rather than aiming toward the "middle" of the class (Hoffman, 2003). The student-teacher continuity afforded by multiage grouping provides a variety of alternatives for special needs students and viable alternatives to grade retention for students experiencing academic problems (Kappler & Roellke, 2002). Even when schools do not

employ multiage grouping for instruction, they may choose to use multiage grouping for other purposes, such as the school advisory program (George & Lounsbury, 2000).

Multiage grouping has frequently been compared to the one-room schoolhouse of early American educational history (George & Lounsbury, 2000). Due to limited numbers of students in many communities, teachers of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries frequently taught students across multiple grades in single classrooms. Stricter age and grade distinctions emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as the industrial revolution produced ideas about strict efficiency and regulation, leading to the dominant single-grade structure that characterizes American education today.

Looping is a popular elementary school practice, somewhat similar to multiage grouping, that is beginning to gain popularity in the middle grades (George & Lounsbury, 2000). However, in looping, students from a single grade level remain with the same teacher for more than one school year. At the end of the time, the teacher loops back to the same grade as at the start with a new group of students. Allowing teachers and students to work together for more than one year has many potential advantages: long lasting, trusting relationships; fewer classroom management problems; and teacher accountability for student growth. George and Lounsbury also compare multiage grouping to the "school-within-a-school" strategy. School-within-a-school divides larger middle grades schools into several "houses." Students assigned to a house stay in that house for several years under the direction of a common group of teachers.

## Review of the Research

Research on multiage grouping at the middle level is scarce. One reason for the scarcity of research may be the relative infrequency of the practice, considering that 95% of students in the United States are educated in single-grade classrooms (Mason & Stimpson, 1996). Kentucky has been a landmark state in promoting



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multigrade instructional arrangements in recent years, particularly at the primary level where 75% of schools use mixed-age grouping strategies (Kentucky Board of Education, 2000).

The majority of the research on multiage classrooms has been at the elementary level. Reviews of the research have been proffered by Ansah (1989), Slavin (1988), Miller (1990, 1991), Pavan (1992), Gutierrez and Slavin (1992), Lloyd (1999), Veenman (1995), and McLaughlin, Irvin, and Doda (1999). Ansah (1989) reviewed the literature specifically for the relationship between multigrade grouping and academic achievement. Likewise, Miller (1990, 1991) summarized the findings of quantitative and qualitative research summaries on multiage grouping. His work included data from rural schools. Veenman (1995) incorporated international studies in his review of literature and distinguished between multiage classrooms and multiage grouping.

George and Lounsbury (2000) conducted a national survey of 33 middle grades schools known to use some form of grouping focused on long-term, teacher-student relationships (e.g., multiage grouping, looping, school-within-a-school). Seventeen schools reported using some form of multiage grouping. The vast majority of respondents reported that the use of multiage grouping had been instrumental in improving classroom climate, teacher advocacy for students, quality of instruction, student achievement, parental involvement, and teacher-to-teacher relationships, among other things. Similar student and teacher outcomes were found in the study of a middle school in Georgia that implemented multigrade classes (Elmore & Wisenbaker, 2000).

Taken collectively, the research findings have either favored multiage grouping or yielded no statistically significant differences between outcomes of students and teachers in multiage and single-grade classes (Hoffman, 2003; Veenman, 1995). While a substantial research base on these effects is developing, the problem of isolating effects of multiage grouping versus effects of other instructional and environmental factors is difficult, due to the lack of true experimental settings in most research (Hoffman, 2003). The research findings have provided both positive and neutral effects of multiage and multigrade grouping. Ansah (1989) found that some children benefitted from multiage classes, while others did better in single-grade classes. Ansah also cited findings that suggest multigrade grouping is associated with enhanced self-concept and positive attitudes toward school (Pratt, 1983). Gutierrez

and Slavin (1992), Pavan (1992), and Miller (1995) found that children in multigrade classrooms fared as well or better than children in single-grade classrooms on standardized measures of achievement.

Hoffman (2003), using interviews and classroom observations, investigated (a) how instruction was operationalized in four teachers' multiage-grouped classrooms and (b) what factors were emergent in these teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning. Teacher beliefs centered around four themes: differentiated instruction, social collaboration, flexible grouping, and student interest. Observational data yielded instructional practices that supported these beliefs and that demonstrated a commitment to the tenets of multiage grouping.

A number of researchers have documented single-school case studies marking the success of multiage grouping (e.g., Elmore & Wisenbaker, 2000; George, 1987; Hopping, 2000). Additionally, George and Lounsbury (2000, Chapter IV) provided numerous examples of other schools that have successfully employed varieties of multiage grouping. Collectively, these case studies provide strong anecdotal evidence of success of multiage strategies and provide little reason to suggest that these strategies are deleterious to the success of young adolescent students.

Among the most profound findings in the survey of the research of multiage grouping is the positive impact on self-esteem and a feeling of bonding within the group when students work together for more than one year. Way (1979) studied the effects of multiage classes on achievement and self-concept. No statistically significant differences were found between multiage and single-age classes in achievement, but the students in multiage classes had higher mean scores on tests for self-concept. Pratt (1983) concluded that multiage classrooms are "socially and psychologically healthy places" because they promote "children's friendships and provide extended contact with adults and peers of varying ages" (p. 114). Miller (1996) concluded that neither academic performance nor social relationships and attitudes were negatively affected by multiage grouping. Further, students from multigrade settings outperformed single-grade students on more than 75% of the measures tested. Another outcome of this sense of community in multiage classes is that fewer students have discipline referrals (Pavan, 1992).

Multiage settings where older children have the opportunity to tutor younger children have produced



promising outcomes (Kappler & Roellke, 2002; Stone, 1994, 1998). Pratt (1986) summarized evidence from both experimental and ethnographic research on the merits of multiage grouping in the affective and social skill areas. He concluded that both the younger students and the tutors benefited from multigrade experiences. French, Waas, Stright, and Baker (1986) found that in the multiage/multiyear structures, more students had the opportunity to be leaders, including older students who otherwise might not have assumed leadership positions.

Miller (1991), in a review of qualitative studies on multiage classrooms, concluded that teachers with a high degree of consistency find teaching in a multiage classroom more difficult than teaching in a single-grade setting and that the former setting requires special preparation in unit production, classroom organization, and individualizing and differentiating curriculum. Teachers also expressed concerns about the demands of teaching different ages and developmentally different students in the same classroom. Teaching multiage students for multiple years provided teachers with the opportunity to get to know their students and the

students' families better than they would have if teaching in a one-year cycle.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

Current research findings about the benefits of multiage grouping on achievement at the middle level are inconclusive (Hoffman, 2003), but there is sufficient evidence to suggest that multiage grouping provides affective advantages. Specifically, multiage grouping has been linked with enhanced student self-esteem, decreased behavioral referrals, formation of close communities, and social and academic continuity. While the future of multigrade grouping is unclear (Pardini, 2005), additional research on this strategy is warranted. Hoffman (2003) noted that additional research investigating the specific practices that go on in multiage classrooms is needed. Additionally, researchers should conduct longitudinal follow-through studies to look at the long-term effects of multiage grouping on students. Finally, studies that control for instructional processes within multiage and single-age settings are needed before conclusive evidence is available about the impact of multiage grouping on achievement in middle grades schools (Kappler & Roellke, 2002).

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## ANNOTATED REFERENCES

George, P. S., & Lounsbury, J. H. (2000). *Making big schools feel small: Multiage grouping, looping, and schools-within-a-school*. Westerville, OH: National Middle School Association.

In this definitive work on alternative grouping strategies in the middle grades, George and Lounsbury, as the title of the work suggests, compare and contrast three alternatives for organizing middle grades students for instruction so that long-term relationships among faculty and students are maximized. Procedures for using multiage grouping for non-instructional (e.g., advisory) activities are also discussed. Each of the three strategies is explained in detail, and examples of successful implementation are provided. The work is premised on the concept of building community to support young adolescent students within middle grades schools, and a review of research is provided to document effects of these strategies on the academic and social success of young adolescent students. Examples of successful programs are discussed. Finally, the authors summarize results of their own national survey of schools implementing strategies for building long-term relationships with students. A list of 19 guidelines for implementing multiage grouping and other similar strategies is provided.



## ANNOTATED REFERENCES (continued)

Elmore, R., & Wisenbaker, J. (2000). The Crabapple experience: Insight from program evaluations. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 82(4), 280–283.

This article documents a three-year evaluation of a project implementing multigrade grouping in a middle school in Fulton County, Georgia. The researchers used mixed methods analysis to measure the effectiveness of the project. Quantitative data indicated an increase in self-esteem from the beginning to the end of the three-year implementation. Standardized achievement tests yielded no statistically significant differences in the achievement of students in the project and those in traditional graded classrooms. Analysis of number of absences across traditional and multigrade groups also yielded no statistically significant differences; however, the number of discipline referrals was greater for the traditional than the multigrade groups. Analysis of qualitative interview and observation data indicated a strong sense of community and extensive use of team planning in the multigrade classrooms. While instructional quality was effective in both traditional and multigrade settings, teachers in the multigrade classrooms used more interdisciplinary curriculum units.

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Veenman, S. (1995). Cognitive and noncognitive effects of multigrade and multiage classes: A best evidence synthesis. *Review of Educational Research*, 65(4), 319–381.

This article presents a comprehensive review of 56 experimental studies on the effects on multigrade/multiage grouping focused on both academic achievement (using standardized measures) and various “noncognitive” outcomes (i.e., personal and social adjustment, self-concept, attitudes toward school, motivation). In the studies reviewed, single-grade or single-age classrooms were considered the “control” condition and multi-grade/multiage classrooms were considered the “experimental” condition. Effect size differences in the outcome variables were compared using standardized mean differences in the achievement and noncognitive outcome variables. No consistent differences were found between students in control and experimental conditions in achievement across a variety of subjects, nor were differences found in the noncognitive variables across the two groups, giving support to the use of multiage/multiage classes as a viable alternative to traditional single-grade classrooms. Further, results indicate with consistency that there are no appreciable deleterious effects of multigrade/multiage grouping on students.

## RECOMMENDED PRACTITIONER RESOURCES

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## CITATION

Daniel, L. (2007). *Research summary: Multiage grouping*. Retrieved [date] from <http://www.nmsa.org/Research/ResearchSummaries/MultiageGrouping/tabid/1282/Default.aspx>



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