

Wyoming Teacher Policy Institute Action Research Final Project

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Social Benefits of Multiage Grouping

Introduction

In my research I am exploring the question: In what forms and to what degree does multiage learning occur throughout Woods Learning Center classrooms and what are the social impacts of those groupings on students?

The aim of this study is to be able to understand and clearly and articulately communicate what “best practices” support multiage learning at Woods Learning Center in order to make sound judgments related to curriculum and instruction.

The study is being conducted at Woods Learning Center, a K-8 public school in Casper, Wyoming that has been teaching using multiage configurations for the past 17 years. The multiage groupings and time spent in these different groups has looked different from year to year and classroom to classroom. The teachers in the school team-teach in their multiage classrooms, which are referred to as pods. Presently at the school the multiage grades are configured in this way: Primary Pod K-1, Intermediate Pod 2-3, Upper Intermediate Pod 4-5, Middle School grade 6, and Middle School 7-8. The sixth grade stands alone due to space issues but do take part in many learning activities with 7th and 8th grade. Woods Learning Center is a small one-unit school with student enrollment

around 153 to 155 students each year. The class size is held to 17 to 1 throughout the school from kindergarten level to eighth grade. Each classroom has 34 students and 2 teachers.

Special education at Woods follows an inclusion model, where the special education teachers and support staff come into the classroom to provide assistance for students with IEP's. The school, since its beginning, has also had a strong parent involvement piece. The parents sign a parent contract saying that they will commit at least two hours per month volunteering at the school. So on any given day it is not unusual to see 4 or 5 adults in the classroom. Parents and support staff flow in and out of various classrooms throughout the day. The students are very used to the relaxed open-door policy and are rarely disturbed by adults or other students coming into the room.

Another unique point of Woods Learning Center is that it does not have a principal. A site-based management team referred to as the administrative team operates the school. The administrative team is comprised of the certified classroom teachers, a teaching assistant, the librarian, an instructional facilitator, and an administrative assistant. Together these members work to do the job of the principal. They manage and help make decisions about what they feel is in the best interest of the students and the school. This school was formed by a group of teachers that were interested in just that, what was the best learning environment for students. They wanted a school that looked not just at the academic needs and success for students, but also the social and emotional needs of those students. Woods Learning Center is really about a community of learning and how that community supports the whole child.

This topic of multiage learning is important because the instructional staff at Woods was interested to see if multiage learning benefits the students more, the same, or less than learning in a traditional grade level setting. Woods is a small one-unit school that has been very successful, and we are interested to see which of the best practices used help support our success. If multiage learning is truly benefiting our students in both academic and social ways, why are district and state levels trying to force schools to fit a cookie cutter design of core curriculum with little flexibility?

My colleagues, Deyonne Jackson and Jennifer Grooms, are researching aspects of multiage learning as well. Together we are hoping that the data collected in our action research projects will help the administrative team at Woods Learning Center articulate and define what multiage learning means at the school and that the results will help us make the most informed decisions about student learning and achievement. It is also planned that these results would be shared with parents, Natrona County School District administrators, and other schools in our district who are multiage or have plans to become multiage learning environments. The information from our research will also be shared in October 2009 at the National Network for Educational Renewal conference in Bellevue, Washington.

Literature Review

In researching my question, “In what forms and to what degree does multiage learning occur throughout Woods Learning Center classrooms and what are the social impacts of those groupings on students,” I looked at the most current research relating to multiage learning. I found that my question needed

to be broken into two parts, the first part of the question really asks about the forms of multiage learning and defining what is multiage. The second part inquires about the social ramifications of multiage learning. In this second branch of my question I found three major themes: leadership and role models, relationships, and community atmosphere.

Defining Multiage.

As I got into articles and books written on multiage learning I found that one of the main issues surrounding multiage research is really defining what is multiage. In a study by Susan Kinsey (2000) she states that, “research in the area of multiage education is still in its infancy. Adequate description of classrooms to be studied is essential in future research efforts” (p. 139). Many descriptions and scenarios of learning relate to multiage. In sifting through the research out there I found information on family groups, non-graded education, continuous progress, looping, and multi-grade groupings in one classroom. All of these relate to or share common parts with multiage learning, but do not fit the definition of multiage. I found what Stone (1997) defines as “a simple definition of multiage classroom dictates: A mixed –age group of children who stay with the same teacher for several years”(p. 105). The definition doesn’t outline whether the children in the classroom stay in multiage groups throughout the day or week or if they are sometimes broken into other groups, such as ability or grade level, for some parts of instruction. Kinsey (2000) did go on to say that, “the contemporary model does not focus on ability grouping or exclusive individual instruction. Rather, the contemporary multiage classroom promotes integration of instructions across grade levels, with students having the opportunity to choose learning activities regardless of grade level” (p. 15).

Leadership and Role Models.

Many of the studies investigated talked about the natural roles of leadership in a multiage classroom. The recurring theme is that the students learn and become comfortable in their first year or years in that room and then as they return to that same classroom they become the “expert” and take on more of a teacher role to be able to help others.

The dynamics of the multiage model enable each student to experience the opportunity of being the “older” and supposedly more skilled, student in the classroom at some point in time. In addition, students who return to the classroom for a second or third year bring an understanding of patterns of helping behaviors, which are part of the classroom expectations (Kinsey, 2000, p. 2).

In interviewing teachers during her research Kinsey (2000) found one teacher felt “...while helping interactions can and do occur in a graded classroom, it is not the “rule” as it is in the multiage classroom. Children in the multiage classroom feel safe in moving into the helping role. They know it is both OK and expected” (p. 107). Many of the sources say that helping behaviors are modeled more in a multiage classroom and that many of these classrooms are more cooperative and less competitive than traditional single grade learning environment. Students are more accepting of children of different abilities and levels. The focus is not on the age the child is and where they should be, but more individualized and focused on helping each child grow. Grant, Johnson and Richardson (1996) comment that socially in a multiage setting, “...students

develop a sense of caring and nurturing as they help each other learn. Where every one is learning at different rates, there is usually less competition; a multiage setting eliminates “faster, better, smarter”. And in a setting where students are by nature supporting and assisting each other, real leadership qualities have a chance to emerge” (p. 36).

Relationships.

One of the main benefits discussed in much of the research on multiage is the development of significant relationships. Many studies talk about relationship building between teacher and student, as well as students with other students. Kinsey (2000) highlights how “..providing an environment where in depth-relationship between teacher and student and between classmates allows for the development of mutual trust” (p. 54). Kinsey (2000) discusses in her studies of Vygotsky’s work that he tells how the relationship between a child and their teacher can sometimes “mimic” the relationship between a child and their primary caregiver. Students who feel emotionally secure in the classroom will be able to open up to explore and learn.

“One major benefit is the continuity it provides the student, who has an opportunity to stay with the same teacher and experience the same routines over a two or three-year period. And since teachers are already familiar with many of their students from the previous year they don’t have to sacrifice instructional time getting to know a whole new class of students each year” (Grant, 1996, p. 36). This consistency in the classroom is thought to be one of the most important strengths of the multiage model because it allows for the development of more in-depth relationships between teacher, students and well as the students’ family (Katz, Evangelow, & Hartman, 1990). Having a student for multiple years helps

the teacher provide the best assistance to that student. They get to know each student personally and are able to best individualize to the needs of that student. Unrath, Robertson, and Valentine (1999) say “teaching multiage students for multiple years provides teacher with the opportunity to get to know their students and the students’ families better than does teaching students in a one-year cycle”(p. 3)

Many sources show that relationships between students in a multiage classroom are also strong. “Multiage classrooms embrace a contemporary design of the multiage model, a design which encourages relationship building activities and cross-age interactions among students (Kinsey, 2000, p. 56). Once again the focus is more on cooperation and helping than it is on competition and being the best.

Community Atmosphere.

The literature shows that multiage classrooms promote helping behaviors, cooperation, and the development of significant relationships. All of these elements help to create a community atmosphere within the multiage classroom. “In its ideal implementation the atmosphere created by a multiage classroom may allow a relaxed, exploratory approach to educational activities, a state of relaxed alertness, with academic learning facilitated by teacher guidance and direction” (Kinsey, 2000, p. 30). All the members in the classroom become partners, where each of them get to use their strengths to help others and the teacher takes on a more facilitator role. “Multiage classrooms develop into “family”, with emphasis on caring, cooperation, and collaboration. Children are at once learner and teacher, the older and more advanced children guiding and providing models for younger, less advanced learners” (Grant, 1996, p. 40). . It

becomes like a family where everyone wants to help and see all the other members succeed.

Grant, Johnson and Richardson (1996) commented on the question about whether multiage reform was just “reinventing the little red one-room school house”. They said, “The multiage concept combines the best of both worlds. The one-room schoolhouse provided a community atmosphere where students worked and learned together, as they did in their families and neighborhoods. Students grouped in the one-room schoolhouse learned from each other and had role models available on a regular basis. Teachers report that children in a multiage setting are less competitive, more cooperative, and as a result are more caring. If one talks to a teacher or student who has experienced the one-room schoolhouse, one can’t help but notice the warmth of the memories evoke. Current multiage classrooms bring the sense of community of that era back to education”(p. 20).

Some sources found did discuss how the multiage classroom better parallels the real world. “Students in a multiage settings do excel because of the experiences of going from a supported younger student to an older model student within the same environment, working with the same teacher for multiple years, and being an active learner. Their classroom setting is more like a real world setting where all ages, genders and ethnicities have something to contribute and something to gain”(Ward, n.d., p. 7). One of the bigger focuses in today’s educational push is preparing children for the changing world we live in. “The multiage classroom actually provides more realistic social interactions for its

students; in real-life, adult situations, no one is grouped by age or ability”(Grant, 1996, p. 20).

Conclusion.

Current research has highlighted that some social benefits of multiage classrooms are that they promote leadership and helping roles, help provide more time together to deepen significant relationships, and provide a more family-like realistic environment. Having students in the same room from one year to the next help establish a climate for the classroom where students become accustomed being a part of that classroom “an environmental system is established which perpetuates itself from one year to the next”(Kinsey, 2000, p. 106). Teachers are able to establish and maintain a community atmosphere where all members support one another’s learning. Despite finding a common definition of multiage, Ward (n.d.) provides words that sum up why multiage classrooms can benefit students both socially and academically when he says, “Multiage environments reflect the world we live in. Multiage environments will help our children become lifelong learners”(p. 2).

Methodology

Our administrative team at Woods Learning Center has seen changes coming down from district and state levels in the past few years that are making it harder and harder for unique schools to meet the demands. Working in tandem with Jennifer Grooms and Deyonne Jackson we attended the Wyoming Teacher Policy Institute in Jackson Wyoming in August 2008. We went into the retreat knowing we wanted to focus on some aspect of our school, we could prove with research, was beneficial to students and helped our school be successful. After

discussions that weekend we decided to focus on different aspects of multiage learning.

After settling on three separate questions that would help us see more about multiage learning, we looked at how we would gather our information. We chose to survey the students and parents on their different perceptions of multiage learning. In September 2008 we sent parent surveys out. The student surveys were given in class that same month. Both parent and student surveys asked questions that delved deeper into both academic and social perceptions of a multiage learning environment.

We felt another valuable portion of information would come from our staff members at Woods. We interviewed the other members on what they believe are the benefits, challenges, social and academic impacts of multiage learning and what other best practices they feel support multiage teaching and learning. These interviews took place over three lunch times in September. The staff was interviewed in small groups of three or four and the interviews were conducted in open discussion format.

Jennifer, Deyonne and I met at least once a week to discuss steps and what problems we were finding. Collecting academic achievement information that related to my colleagues' questions posed to be the most difficult issue. Changing of assessments and the way the data was reported made interpreting the academic information very hard. My question focused more on the social aspects of multiage learning and I was able to glean much of my information from the perception surveys. We supported one another in keeping on track with our work and helping to see what steps each of us needed to take next.

My first step was looking at the way different classrooms grouped children. One portion of my question addressed the variety of groupings taking place at Woods Learning Center. I documented the minutes per week that each classroom at Woods spends in different types of groupings. After breaking down each classroom's weekly schedule I was able to see four main ways to define the various ways we work with students. I color coded the weekly schedules into these four groups which were classified as multiage heterogeneous (2 year age span), multiage homogeneous (leveled by ability), grade level (1 year age span), and whole school multiage (K-8).

My second step was breaking down the information from the perception surveys and teacher interviews and analyzing how it related to the social impacts of multiage learning. Jennifer, Deyonne and I used the surveys to make graphs for each question giving us a closer look at how parents and students at our school saw multiage learning. We also typed up all the comments under each question which helped give more detail into the responses of parents and students. We typed out the dialogue from the teacher interviews for each question as well. This helped us categorize and see common threads among all of the notes.

After looking at the student surveys we noticed that many students, who usually have a lot to say, didn't write many comments. Overall we didn't have as much input from the students in the comment section of the survey. Deyonne and I decided that we might get more information if we interviewed a small sample of kids. So we chose a couple students from each level of kindergarten to eighth grade to do a video interview with. We then watched the video and took notes about what the students had to say.

Findings

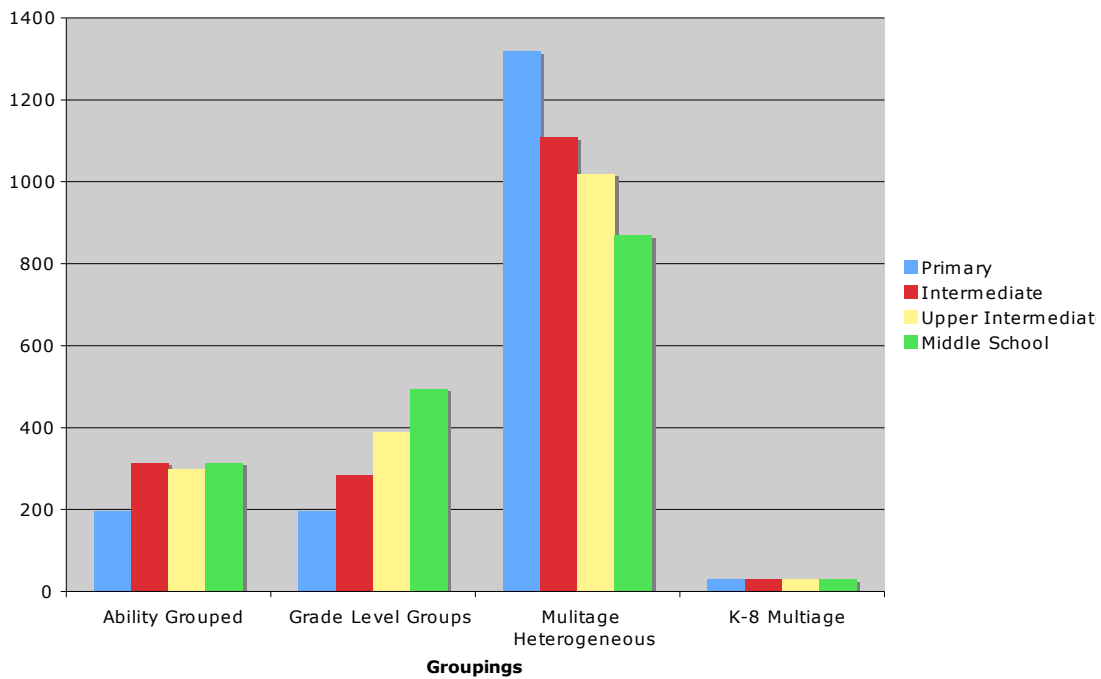
Types of Groups Occurring Throughout Classrooms.

The question I am addressing in my research is really a two-part question, the first part asks about what forms and to what degree does multiage learning take place at Woods Learning Center. Deyonne, Jennifer and I were truly interested to see if the same types of groupings were taking place in each classroom or pod and if the time spent in these groups was the same across the school.

As I color coded each pod's weekly classroom schedule I was able to lump the variety of learning groups into four main classifications: multiage heterogeneous (2 year age span), multiage homogeneous (leveled by ability), grade level (1 year age span), and whole school multiage (K-8).

Multiage heterogeneous groups are where students are in a mixed age level of about a two-year span. For example in the K-1 Primary Pod at the beginning of the year you may have a kindergarten child who just turned 5 and some first graders who are already 7. The classrooms at Woods Learning Center are organized so that we are together in these two-year age span groups in the room. However, throughout the day and week we assemble children in ways other than this for learning activities. Deyonne, Jennifer and I wanted to find out if we, as a school, were still spending the majority of time in these true multiage groups or if we were spending more time in other classifications. The graph below shows what was affirmed.

Average Minutes Spent in Different Groupings



This graph reflects the minutes per week spent in different types of groups for each classroom or pod. Across the board as a school we are still spending the majority of our time in multiage heterogeneous groups with a two-year age span. Classes at Woods Learning Center are sometimes grouped in other ways as well. Multiage homogeneous groups are leveled by ability. In order for us to grow children it is necessary sometimes to group by the skill level those children are at. In studying the weekly schedules I noted that these ability group times were mainly for reading groups, spelling groups, and in middle school math. It was also noted that reading, spelling and math activities were in other portions of the weekly schedule and not always in leveled groups.

Grade level groups, traditional one year age span, also occurred throughout the weekly schedule at Woods. It has been a goal at our school to adapt and change to best meet the needs of the students at our school. A few years ago it was noticed that our students were overall not achieving as well in math as they were in other subjects. As an administrative team, with guidance from our school improvement team, we made the decision to split grade level for math instruction kindergarten through fifth grade. We had adopted the Investigations program and felt that we needed to try to follow the grade level program with fidelity to see if it would help our students with math skills. Middle school ability levels for math instruction in order to prepare students for the Hathaway scholarship requirements. However, middle school divides grade level wise for instruction in Foreign Language, this way they are able to offer two years of foreign language.

The last type of grouping category that occurs at Woods Learning Center is K-8 whole school multiage groups. We group once a week for 30 minutes in what we call our circle groups. Each circle group is comprised of two staff members and about 20 to 22 students ranging from kindergarten to eighth grade level. Names of two teachers and then students from each grade level are randomly drawn from a hat to establish the circle group members. Even though these groups happen only once a week for 30 minutes, we feel that these groups are some of the most important time that goes into establishing the culture of our school. This half hour is spent doing team-building activities, which help establish a safe and comfortable community within our school. Cammy Rowley, a professor of education at Casper College recently did an ethnographic study of our circle groups for her doctoral degree. She shows that participants in circle

group saw the time as an opportunity to meet new people outside their pod and a chance for younger students and older students to make connections. Dr. Rowley's comments below highlight how circle groups help establish a democratic community.

The K-8 grouping complements democratic practices. Circle group offered opportunities for students to participate in and understand a more democratic approach. During group meetings, students expressed voice verbally and in writing. They voiced concerns and expressed opinions, often solving problems or making decisions. Students were active participants in democracy, believing that they had something to offer each other and the larger community (2009, pg. 164).

Circle groups help build a family-like environment within the school. A place where the members know one another, help one another and feel like a valued member of the population.

Student Surveys.

The student perception surveys were given in class to all the students at Woods Learning Center. Kindergarten through fifth grade students were given a fairly simplified survey and middle school, 6th through 8th grade, students were given a survey asking more specific questions.

The younger students had a survey with these seven statements:

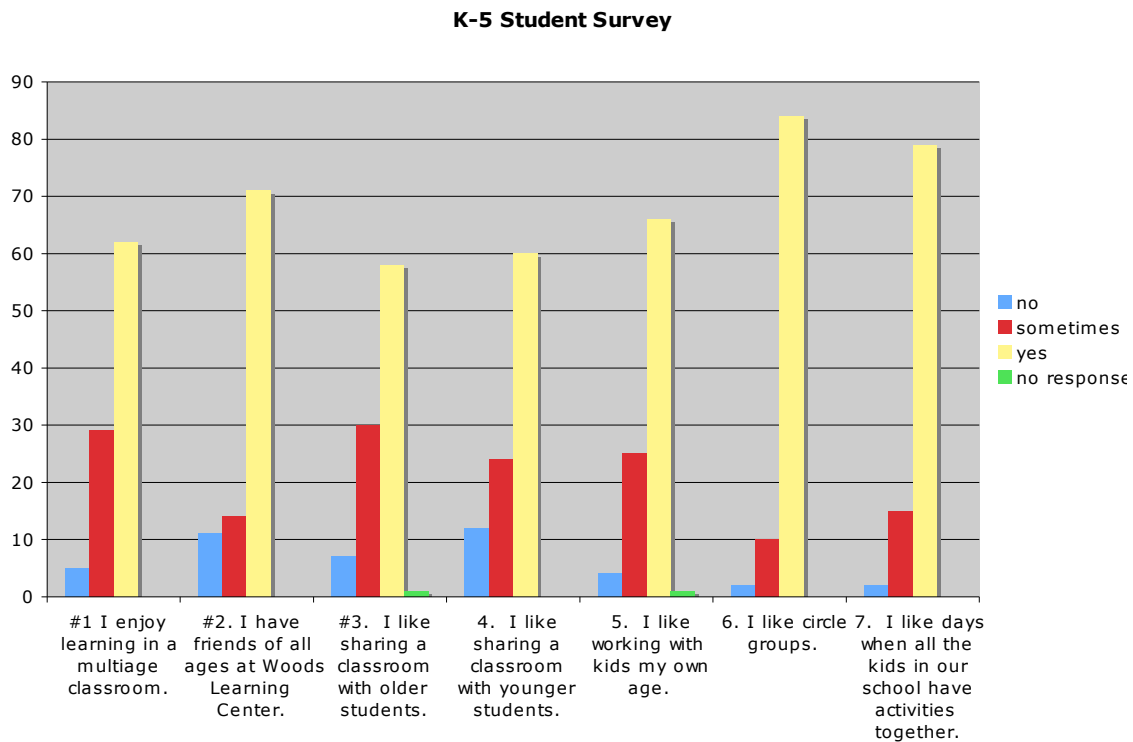
1. I enjoy learning in a multiage classroom.
2. I have friends of all ages at Woods Learning Center.
3. I like sharing a classroom with older students.
4. I like sharing a classroom with younger students.
5. I like working with kids my own age.

6. I like circle groups.

7. I like days when all the kids in our school have activities together.

This K-5th grade survey only had three possible responses: No, Sometimes, Yes. The responses were also marked with a sad face, straight face, and happy face for the younger students. The teachers read the statements to the kindergarten and first grade students and the children circled the faces. Second through fifth grade students did the survey on their own.

The graph below shows the responses from the younger student's survey.



The young students are very positive. The majority of their responses were “yes”. I believe this survey shows the enthusiasm of young students. Very few

of the surveys had any negative responses or comments. All the survey really showed was that the students enjoyed learning with all ages of children. This survey only had one comment section at the end of all of the questions. There was not an opportunity to comment on each separate question. One Kindergarten student commented that, "I like center time with different aged kids. I like switching groups. Olders help me." Another first grade student said, "I like to be able to switch groups and work with different age kids." Many of the survey comments talked about how older students help the younger in both the classroom and in circle groups. A Kindergarten girl commented, "I like having older friends because I think it's fun and they help me." A first grade student highlighted how those friendships follow students beyond the classroom and circle group to other parts of the school with her words, " I like playing with the older kids because some of them help us. I like how at recess there are other kids of different ages outside to help us and make sure we are safe. Older kids come up and help if I get hurt." This remark shows that working with all ages of kids in the school can build a family-like culture where kids feel comfortable with students of all age levels.

The middle school students were given a more detailed perception survey. The survey was scored on a five point Likert scale- 1 strongly disagree, 2 disagree, 3 neutral, 4 agree, 5 strongly agree-The questions on their survey were as follows:

1. Students learn leadership skills in multiage settings.
2. Students enjoy learning in multiage settings.
3. Multiage classrooms provide a greater range of academic opportunities for students.

4. Multiage classrooms help students grow socially.
5. If I had a choice, I would choose to attend a school with multiage classrooms.

Four of the five questions relate to the social aspects of multiage learning.

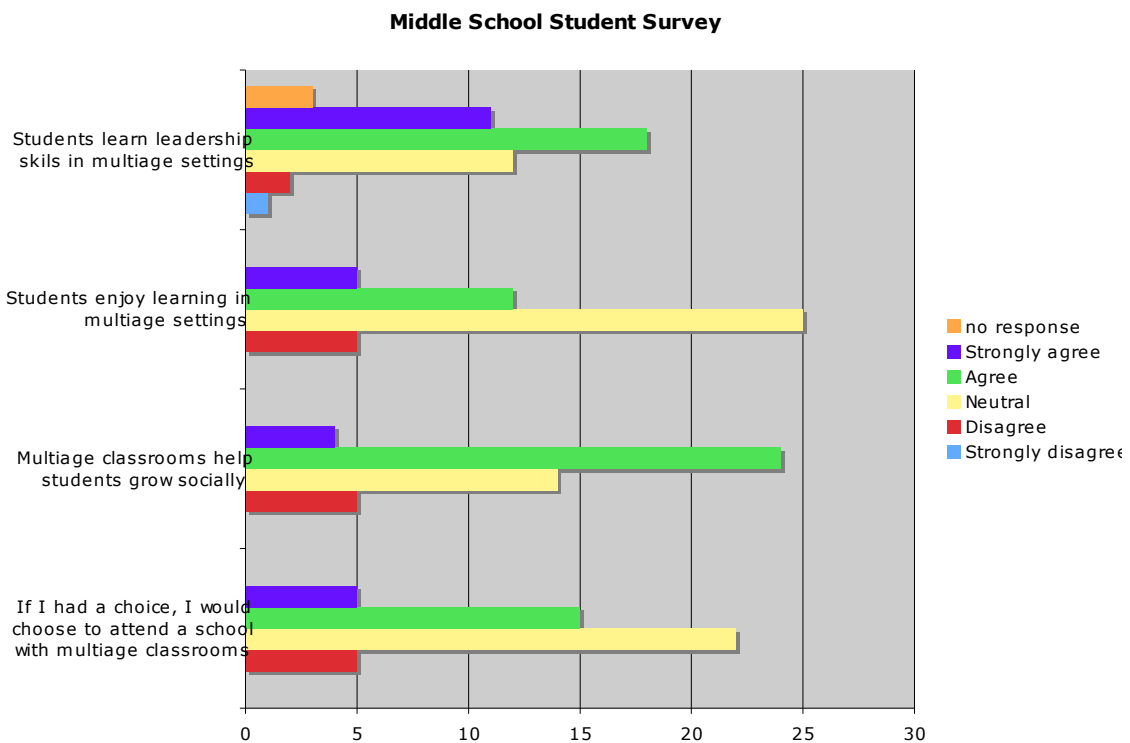
Another question, which gathered information about academic growth in first and second years in a pod, was also part of the survey but not on the same five point scale. Because academic growth was not part of my research question the

results from this question and statement number 3 above are not reported on.

More information on the academic growth in multiage settings can be found in

the research of my two colleagues, Deyonne Jackson and Jennifer Grooms. The

middle school responses are shown on the graph that follows.



The middle school student responses were more scattered. They were not as positive as the results of the k-5 survey and do not show a large amount of strongly agree like the parent responses in the next section.

The survey was set up to give older students opportunity to comment on each question.

The graph showed that the majority either agreed or strongly agreed that students learn leadership in multiage settings. After that many of the students were neutral. Not many comments were given on this question but one student did say, “ I strongly agree because the older kids can be role models for the younger kids and help them.” Other comments said that bad and good role models are followed and one student felt, “leadership skills can be learned in any classroom.”

The next section of the graph inquired whether the middle school students enjoyed learning in multiage settings. Although a good portion still said agree the majority of students were neutral on this statement. The few comments given were varied from “it’s nice” to “it’s annoying”. One student’s comment pretty much summed up this section saying, “ It depends on the student.”

The third question gathered insight into whether middle school students felt multiage classrooms helped students grow socially. This time the majority agreed. One student said, “I think this is true that students grow socially, because they can interact more with different age levels.” Many students felt that putting two classes together gave them opportunity to develop more friendships. One girl commented that, “it is nice to talk to younger and older children because you connect with different kids in different ways.”

The last question on the middle school survey asked about whether if given a choice would they choose a multiage classroom. Again on this statement many middle school students were neutral. However, almost as many students said agree or strongly agree. A few comments relayed that they would rather be in a single grade classroom, but other comments again talked about more people and more friendships. One student said, "Multiage classrooms add some advantages and some disadvantages." One boy just said, "I don't care, but I like it here."

Student Interviews.

As my colleagues and I were reviewing the survey results we noticed that the younger student survey had quite a few responses from the Kindergarten and first grade students, but not many comments from students in second through fifth grade. This could have been that the k-1 student surveys were read by the teachers and that students were encouraged to write or have teacher dictate comments. Second through fifth grade did the survey on their own and many did not take the time to give comments.

We wanted to draw more thoughts from some of the students to get a better feel of what their true opinions were of learning in a multiage classroom. We believed that interviewing them might be a way to get them to share more. The student interviews were conducted with a sample of six students, 3 boys and 3 girls, ranging in grade levels from 1st to 7th grade. We realize that this small of a sample doesn't give substantial data, but it gave us more insight into how students felt about multiage learning.

During the video taped interview the students were asked the following questions:

1. What is good about Woods Learning Center?
2. What would you tell people about multiage learning?
3. What do you like dislike about learning with different aged kids?
4. What did you learn by watching other students' projects?
5. Do you think you learned more during your first or second year in a pod?

The first three questions correlated to the social aspects of multiage learning. All the students, regardless of age, had such great things to say. They thought Woods Learning Center was good because, "we are not a really big school, but there are enough people. Not too many... just the right amount." They liked circle groups and getting to know people across the grade levels, but also that they knew they would always be in the same class each year, with their best friends. A middle school girl said, " I like the big groups in multiage, you're always with different people and get to know them better." This comment really fit the next question too which inquired about what they would tell someone who didn't know anything about multiage learning.

When posed with what they would tell others about multiage learning, I found that even children said many of the same things I had found in my literature on multiage. One student said, " Multiage learning is a positive thing, like I said before it puts you with more people and you get to learn like leadership or sometimes not leading." The same boy said that it puts you with people and teaches you that you have to work with them. A few students talked about leadership and teaching the youngers what they knew. Another little girl talked

about the relationship between students and the teachers in a multiage, multiple year environment. She said, “ You don’t have to get used to a new teacher every single year. You only have to get used to them once and you have 2 years.” Even the young children understood different groupings that helped them socially and academically. A first grader said, “ We get to play with each other (meaning the whole group) a lot of the time. But we also get to go to reading and math with different groups.”

When asked what they liked or disliked about multiage the students could see both advantages and disadvantages. Many students commented about how it is sometimes frustrating and even annoying when the younger kids in the class don’t get something. They discussed how it was sometimes hard to show them or teach them. One first grade girl said, “Sometimes I have trouble doing (my work) different times... I can’t do anything because they are always asking me questions the whole time.” Another boy retorted back by saying, “ on the flip side you feel important when you are the older person and they are asking you questions.” An older student remarked, “The thing I like about working in (multiage) groups is that if there is something that another person doesn’t know and you teach it to them, you feel really good about it.”

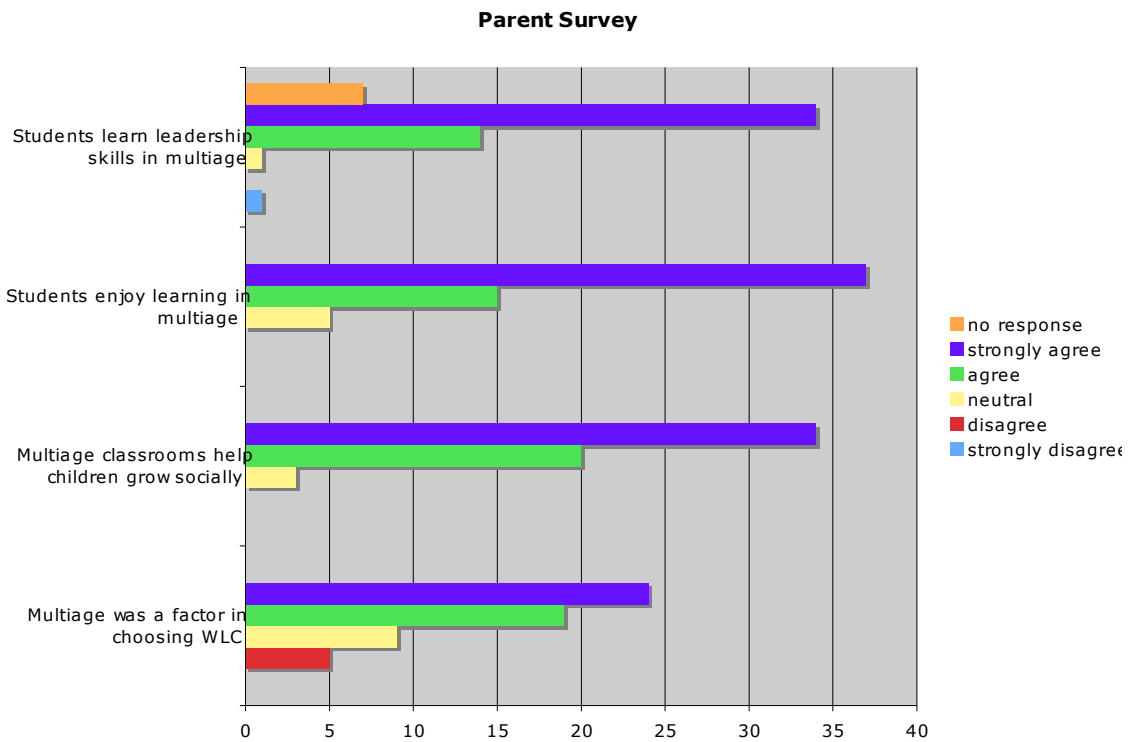
Parent Surveys.

A survey, that paralleled what the middle school students were given, was distributed to parents. Like the middle school survey the statements addressed their perceptions of both the academic and social aspects of multiage learning. The survey was also on a five point Likert scale- 1 strongly disagree, 2 disagree, 3 neutral, 4 agree, 5 strongly agree- and it posed the following five statements:

1. Students learn leadership skills in multiage

2. Students enjoy learning in multiage
3. Multiage classrooms provide greater academic opportunities
4. Multiage classrooms help children grow socially
5. Multiage was a factor in choosing WLC

Four of these five questions were pertinent to my research on the social aspects of multiage learning. The next graph reflects the parent responses.



This parent piece was huge because, as a staff, we really did want to see if parents believed that multiage learning was an important and beneficial part of our school. The parent responses were overwhelming positive in favor of multiage.

Parent responses reflected the literature I found. The majority strongly agreed that a multiage learning environment helped students learn leadership skills and grow socially. One parent commented, “When they are a younger they learn to follow, when they are an older they learn to lead.” Another said, “ Having the olders help “teach” is very stimulating.” One parent thought that being in a mixed age level group also taught students “...independence, responsibility, and a number of other socially desirable traits.”

The majority of parents also felt that their children enjoyed learning as part of a multiage setting. In my literature review I highlighted the family-like, more real world atmosphere, of a multiage environment. Some parents observed this as well. One parent said, “The family atmosphere was a huge plus.” Another parent remarked that, “ In a lot of my research/reading about home schooling this topic came up- one of the benefits of a “one-room” school house is this multiage setting. After kids enter “the real world” they will be dealing with multiage and better know how to interact. Also, chronological age is not always the same as intellectual/maturity/interest age and multiage helps with this also.”

Staff Interviews.

The staff was interviewed about their viewpoint of multiage learning. They were asked in an open discussion setting about the benefits, drawbacks, challenges, social impacts, academic impacts, and best practices that support multiage learning. The staff’s commentary echoed the literature on multiage learning.

When discussing the benefits the staff brought up leadership roles, building relationships, academic and social flexibility, and maintaining the classroom and school culture from year to year. Many comments on how the older students in the pod are able to support and help the youngers. Kate Cherry said that, “At the beginning of the year older take a leadership role. Older students nurture, show routines and procedures of the classroom to the younger students.” Marci Miles said, “Multiage gives opportunities for children to mentor and to be mentored.”

The staff talked a lot about the benefit of both team teaching and having students for more than one year. Jim Gaither said, “Multiage allows teachers to keep the culture going in the classroom. There is less setting expectations because the olders model the expectations. Teachers don’t have to start fresh each year.” Guy Sallade remarks, “ There is stability because students are in a pod for 2 years. It usually takes to November to get to know kids, having them for two year allows you to know them better, build relationships.” The staff felt that team teaching was an important piece of developing relationships too. Jim Gaither said, “Children need a mentor/adult they feel connected to.” Marci Miles commented that in a Woods Learning Center classroom, “there are two teachers to connect to. If a child doesn’t get also with one teacher, there’s another teacher.” Denise Snider explains another benefit of teaming by saying, “There are two teachers so one can deal with student behavior problems, while the other is teaching.” John Bolender adds to her words saying, “There are two teachers to address difficulties.”

When asked about the drawbacks and challenges the staff could account for some disadvantages too. Many talked about the difficulties of having two years of curriculum and how the testing some grade levels require dictates when they have to teach certain skills. Some saw that combining the two grades made group bigger and harder to manage. Kate Cherry said, “Thirty-four is a large group.” John Bolender went on to say, “It is sometimes hard to know where all 34 are academically.”

When asked about the social impacts they saw stemming from multiage, the staff had a few more advantages to add. Many saw that the students had more flexibility for social purposes. The larger group added extra opportunities to as Kate said, “to gravitate toward where they are socially.” Younger students who were more mature could choose to be with older students at times and older students who needed more time to grow socially might relate better with some of the younger students. Many staff members felt it made transitions to next grade easier. Marci Miles commented on this easier transition by saying, “the peer groups above and below already know each other.” The teachers had so much to say about the benefits that it was hard to include everything but they felt that multiage learning is in Jim Gaither’s words, “similar to looping, the culture renews each year.” Pam Hopkins commented that, “Multiage fosters a community. Feels like a family, consolidated community.”

The staff also had a long list of best practices they felt helped support multiage learning at Woods Learning Center. The list first included team teaching and students staying with same teacher for more than one year. Teachers talked about how team teaching gave them the ability to be more flexible and do more differentiated or individualized learning in small groups. They liked that Woods

did student centered, hands-on, inquiry based activities with standards based assessments instead of traditional grades. They also felt that the projects we do school wide and the technology, made available to the students, added to the success in our classrooms.

Conclusions

The first finding I can conclude from all of this is that, as a school we have various groupings but school wide the majority of our time is spent in multiage groups. We truly are a multiage school model. We spend time in mixed age groups but also group by ability, grade level and as a whole school to best meet the needs of the children.

In her research Deyonne Jackson concluded that students at Woods Learning Center are growing academically. Jennifer Grooms found that her data was important to show that multiage classroom did not hinder most students academically. Both of my researching counterparts felt that more research needed to be done in the area of multiage learning and academic achievement. Academically most students at Woods Learning Center are achieving at or above students in other schools but we cannot prove whether multiage classrooms are an important factor in this academic achievement.

However, my conclusion on the social aspect of multiage learning is that the majority of students, parents and teachers support multiage learning at Woods Learning Center and see social benefits from being in this multiage environment.

Young students enjoyed learning with many different age levels and felt they had friendships with kids of all ages. They really liked circle groups and days when all students, kindergarten through eighth grade, mixed together for

activities. It was hard to come to a conclusion on middle school student perceptions. Many were neutral or agreed that there were benefits to learning in a multiage setting. Consistently about 5 of the perception surveys were negative across the board. Knowing middle school students this could just be their attitude or the just way they were feeling the day the survey was given. Most affirming piece of information were the parent perception surveys. A huge majority of parents gave positive feedback on the social benefits they see in multiage learning. Not all the parents who responded choose Woods Learning Center because of its multiage configuration, but now in this setting they felt their child enjoyed learning and that being in a mixed age group helped their child grow socially and learn leadership.

Recommendation

In a school of choice district, like the Natrona County School District, it has been proven that many different models of schools can be successful. Not all schools should look, feel, or instruct children exactly the same. Kinsey (2000) stated that, "Recognizing these aspects of both traditional and multiage education which may be valuable and necessary in creating the educated citizen of today may result in the development of a multiage educational framework that stands the test of time and is not subject to the vicissitudes of a pendulum swing of educational trends" (p. 141). Woods Learning Center is an example of a multiage model that is supported by students, parents and staff and that has proven to be successful.

It is recommended that unique models of schools continue to be a choice. When the Natrona County School District and other districts across the state and nation look at adopting policies for curriculum they need to consider all models of

schools. Decisions for mapping grade level curriculum and testing need to remain flexible enough for multiage and other non-traditional schools to meet the requirements and still continue to function in the way their model was designed. I suggest that curriculum mapping encompass more of a two or three-year span of time rather than just a grade level.

All school settings should consider using multiage groupings in some form to obtain the social benefits. Circle groups at Woods Learning Center only take place one half hour each week, but this short amount of time is felt by staff to be essential in helping to establish a close community atmosphere within the school. It was found that even schools like Woods, that are grouping multiage the majority of the time, could expand the age levels of these groups. Children of even greater age gaps could be mixed together more often. It was shown that this might deepen the social impacts of multiage groups.

My research of multiage classrooms has given me a better understanding of the advantages and disadvantages of learning in this type of environment. The information from the current literature, surveys and interviews has helped to affirm for me that multiage learning can be a beneficial model. At a time when the world is changing at a fast pace the multiage environment may be the most realistic one to help prepare our students for the real world.

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