Multiage Classrooms: A Look at Advantages, Disadvantages, and Effective Management

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A multiage classroom can be defined as a learning environment that includes students that are one to three years apart in age. These classroom settings are not as prominent as they used to be, due to different states’ accountability laws (Plucker, Song, & Spradlin, 2009). However, there are still schools that implement them either out of desire or necessity. Through review of fairly current research there are both positives and negatives perspectives on multiage classrooms. It is also very clear through article reviews in order for a multiage classroom to be effective; there are specific teaching strategies that need to take place. In implementing a multiage classroom, it is crucial to understand the advantages and disadvantages of it along with its’ important components that promote success.

There are several advantages to multiage classrooms which include: (a) stronger social & emotional skills; (b) stronger, healthier rapports; and (c) stronger emphasis on individualized pace for learning. According to Plucker, Song, and Spradlin (2009) in well-organized multiage classrooms there are diverse but balanced groups of students that create natural social settings. These settings promote social and emotional skills. There are many opportunities within these classrooms that allow for students to work collaboratively together. During these times students are constantly being faced with learning how to appropriately interact with others. Due to the age differences in the classrooms it is also not uncommon for older students to model appropriate ways of social interaction for the younger students (Kappler & Roellke, 2002). Studies have shown consistently that there are advantages to socioemotional development. Kinsey, McClellan, and Veenman write;

Students in multiage classrooms demonstrate more positive attitudes toward school, greater leadership skills, greater self-esteem, and increased pro-social and fewer aggressive behaviors, compared to peers in traditional graded classrooms (as cited in Kinsey, 2001, p.2).

Strong relationships among teachers, students, and families are another advantage of multiage classrooms. Most often students that start in multiage classrooms stay within those classrooms for two to three years. This provides continuity that helps build connections between students,
teachers, and families involved (Plucker, Song, & Spradlin, 2009). Since multiage classrooms are taught in a manner that allows for students to be in various groups throughout the day with different peers, students are encouraged to build rapport with one another. Students recognize and understand the importance of accepting peers' strengths and weaknesses, and learn from one another (Hoffman, 2002). Carter (2005) writes that her multiage classroom has become an extended family where relationships develop, and students’ learning flourishes. Lastly, another advantage to multiage classrooms is the focus on individualized paces for learning. The teaching approach of multiage classrooms allows for students to develop at their own pace according to Bozzone (as cited in Kappler & Roellke, 2002). Through the use of differentiated teaching and project-based learning, students are provided with opportunities that challenge individual abilities (Plucker, Song, & Spradlin, 2009). These three advantages are all important components to creating successful multiage classrooms; however, there are also disadvantages.

The disadvantages to multiage classrooms include: (a) adapting curriculum, (b) overcoming rejection; and (c) difficulty implementing effectively. Since multiage classrooms are made up of different age students, there needs to be flexibility in adapting the curriculum to meet students’ needs. According to Farkas and Duffett (as cited in Plucker, Song, & Spradlin, 2009) eight out of ten teachers oppose differentiated instruction. If teachers are not willing to adapt the curriculum, multiage instruction is not going to be effective. Some believe there isn’t the time or flexibility to make appropriate changes to the curriculum, and at times teachers are made to teach more than one curricula at a time (Kappler & Roellke, 2002). Rejection is another disadvantage to multiage classrooms. As implied above, teachers are not always willing to make changes especially ones that require an increased workload (Plucker, Song, & Spradlin, 2009). Multiage classrooms may involve change in teaching style, extra training, and more preparation.
therefore not always being accepted by teachers. Often parent’s initial reactions to multiage classrooms are negative also. Parents express concerns about the mix of abilities and ages in a classroom and the quality of instruction (Plucker, Song, & Spradlin, 2009). Parents do not always understand that all students can benefit from the differences in abilities within the classroom. Lastly, difficulty implementing multiage programs can be another disadvantage. It is not easy to implement idealized models of multiage classrooms, and in some cases they do not align with federal and state accountability laws (Plucker, Song, & Spradlin, 2009). There are many grade level and testing standards, which are difficult to meet in the multiage settings. As noted in the two earlier examples, teachers and parents are not always willing to buy-into the idea of multiage classrooms. Without the support of teachers, parents and administrators this type of environment cannot be implemented successfully. According to Kappler and Roellke (2002) in order to create effective groupings it relies on teachers and students to specifically be assigned to work together. This can be a challenge if the idea of the program is not supported.

Understanding the disadvantages and advantages of multiage classrooms are important to take into consideration when implementing such a program.

There are some key components to making sure the implementation of multiage classrooms are effective. Some crucial ones include: (a) support system from administration, teachers, parents; and (b) training for teachers on teaching strategies. It is important for teachers, parents and administration to all understand what multiage education is, and the effects it can have on students. The support of administration is crucial; they must understand the necessary changes in curriculums and assessments (Kappler & Roellke, 2002). Teachers need to be in favor of the program, and be willing to make changes in their teaching styles. If teachers are opposed to the concept and the change that it requires, it can hinder the program and other teachers within
it (Plucker, Song, & Spradlin, 2009). Parents should be well informed about multiage classrooms and how they are managed. Kappler & Roellke (2002) believe that parents should have the opportunity to express any concerns or questions. Carter (2005) writes that in her classroom they work to earn the parents trust, and clearly communicate intentions to parents.

The second critical component of implementation is; effective training for teachers. Teachers need to be adequately prepared on how to teach using differentiated instructions and assessments (Plucker, Song, & Spradlin, 2009). Multiage classrooms are managed through flexible grouping, and teachers need to have a clear understanding of how to organize and teach in this type of environment. Hoffman (2002) writes that multiple strategies for peer learning are necessary within multiage classrooms and teachers need to understand the importance of this. In order for all students to successfully learn in multiage classrooms, teachers need to be managing and organizing with the students’ different ages and abilities in mind. Teachers need appropriate training to understand this management and do it effectively.

Through the review of current research there are both advantages and disadvantages to multiage classrooms. Careful consideration of these points is important when implementing this type of program. It is also critical to understand the key components that make multiage classrooms successful.
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