Evanshen, P. (2002). Non-graded, multiage classrooms: Structural processes that actually work. Tennessee's Children, Winter, 25-27.

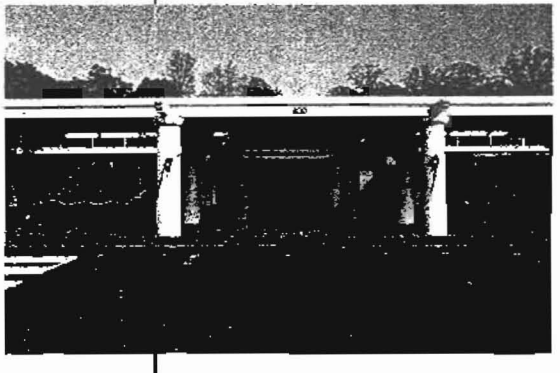
Non-graded, Multi-age Classrooms: Structural Processes that Actually Work

by Pamela Evanshen

Nine years ago a team of educators and an architect designed a "21st Century School" building and program for children, ages six weeks through eleven years. With the philosophy in mind that *all children can learn*, the team researched program structures and curricula. During the research, including school visits and extensive reading, the terms "non-graded" and "multi-age" continued to surface. Ultimately the Washington Elementary School in Kingsport, TN provided this educational multi-age learning community. A discussion of this structure and the programs resulting from that structure follows.

Non-graded and Multi-age Groupings

Goodlad and Anderson (1959) have defined non-graded education as the term used to describe schools that group students in classes with more than a one-year age span. Gaustad (1994) has defined multi-age grouping as the practice of teaching a group of children with an age range greater than two years. These groupings are without the traditional grade level designation; for example, kindergarten or third grade. The focus of multi-age, non-graded classrooms is on each child's individual progress. Research has shown that multi-age groupings encourage teachers to use developmentally appropriate practices, integrate the curriculum, and provide active learning opportunities for **all** students (Gaustad, 1997).



A multi-age, non-graded program structure and practice focuses on the individual child rather than the whole group. Developmentally appropriate practices utilize what is known about the child coupled with specific learning theories. The strengths, interests and needs of individual children, and the unique social and cultural aspects of the individual child are considered when making decisions about the education and well-being of students (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). The timetable for individual progress varies. It is not expected that everyone will follow the same pattern. Multi-age instruction gives teachers the time and flexibility to use developmentally appropriate practices and for those practices to function effectively and efficiently.

Washington Elementary School

Four groupings were developed for the Washington Elementary School. They were: infant/toddler, preschool, primary, and intermediate. The infant/toddler group included children six weeks through approximately two and a half years of age. Preschoolers were three through five years of age. The primary group included children traditionally identified as children who were in kindergarten through second grade, and the intermediate group consisted of children traditionally considered third through fifth grades.

Infants, toddlers and preschoolers were served in what was recognized by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) as an Accredited Early Childhood Learning Center. Primary and Intermediate children were served in a non-graded multi-age elementary program recognized in 2001 as a National Blue Ribbon School of Excellence. These highly regarded recognitions helped to answer some of the first questions parents and the commu-

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nity asked about implementing a multi-age program. One important question was, "Does it work?"

There were many positive aspects for each of the four groupings. In the infant/toddler multi-age classroom, the teacher and children were afforded the opportunity to develop trusting bonds and relationships. In many programs serving infants, when the child turns one year of age, she or he moves to a new class with new teachers, routines and procedures. Yet, early formation of a trusting relationship is critical to the development of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1994). Allowing infants to stay with their teachers for two years was not only positive for the children but also for the parents. This fostered communication, which resulted in reciprocal relationships between teachers and parents. Time needs to be allotted for these types of relationships to form.

In the preschool multi-age classroom, a sense of family permeated. All children regardless of their age, worked together throughout the day. Both Piaget's (1962) and Vygotsky's (1962) learning theories, where children learn by discovering and interacting with others, were evident in the daily events as they interacted with their environment, with one another, and with their teachers. Children felt safe in their explorations leading to positive social/emotional development, a co-requisite to the development of cognitive ability.

In the primary (traditionally known as kindergarten through second grade) and intermediate (traditionally known as third through fifth grade) classrooms, integrated thematic instruction was the mode for curricula exploration. Kovalik's (1994) model bringing together brain research, teaching strategies, and curriculum development was used as a basis for meaningful learning and self-motivation for students. For example, students actively participated in an in-depth study of *habitats*. Thematic units extended learning across the curriculum. Children were engaged in reading, writing and researching topics in order to gain a deeper understanding of the topic while working individually on specific skill development goals. Students learned how to learn in a brain compatible environment.

Kovalik and Olsen (2001) identified the elements of a brain compatible classroom as: absence of threat, meaningful content, choice, adequate time, movement, enriched environment, collaboration, immediate feedback, and mastery (p. 18). Every brain is different; therefore, every learner has preferred ways of learning. When students have choices that lead to preferred ways of learning, it allows the learner to become responsible and engaged in the process (Kovalik, 1994). In addition, Gardner's (1993) *multiple intelligences theory* supports not insisting that all students learn the same thing in the same way.

According to Gaustad (1992), "Students in a non-graded classroom are grouped for instruction in many ways, some of which are also used in graded classrooms" (p. 24). The difference in non-graded programs is the flexibility of the groupings based on the needs of the individual student. Groups may meet for a variety of purposes with and without the teacher. Groupings may be formed based on interests, academic needs, cooperative learning, and learning styles. Math and reading in multi-age, non-graded schools are often taught in homogeneous groups with students of

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similar developmental level, regardless of age. As children advance, groups are re-formed to accommodate accordingly (Gaustad, 1992).

Subjects like science and social studies lend themselves to heterogeneous groupings. These groupings often form into cooperative groups, learning teams or clubs. Students working in cooperative groups learn about the topic, practice skills at their current level of ability, and practice social skills as they work cooperatively with their multi-age peers (Gaustad, 1992).

Problem-solving groupings can also be found in multi-age, non-graded classrooms. Students engage in brainstorming sessions. The teacher fosters cross-age interaction as he/she directs questions and comments back and forth between children (Gaustad, 1992). Peer tutoring or partnering of students has been shown to be valuable in the learning environment. Children learn so much from one another (Nachbar, 1989). Younger children look up to older children for leadership. Older students can help younger students; and not too surprisingly, some younger students can often help older students. All children can use skills they have learned in a situation that can boost self-esteem (Grant & Johnson, 1995).

According to Anderson (1993) who visited the Washington School in 1995, multi-age heterogeneous grouping is the most natural learning environment for children. The multi-age, non-graded model acknowledges individual differences in ability, learning styles, and rate of development as it builds on that diversity. It is an ideal model according to Grant and Johnson (1995).

And.....it has worked! ⌘

This article is dedicated to the (past and present) administrators, teachers, staff, parents, children and community of Washington Elementary School in Kingsport, TN, including the Early Childhood Learning Center and School Age Childcare Program. It is because of your commitment, dedication, hard work, positive attitude and passion to meet the needs of ALL children that a truly wonderful multi-age learning community exists where children love to learn! Thank you for allowing me to participate in the journey.

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