Growing Together: How Academics and Relationships Develop in a Multigrade Classroom

by

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study explores how academic development and relationships evolve within the context of a multigrade classroom. This study examines the instructional practices, classroom structures, and relational dynamics that shape student experiences in settings where multiple grade levels are taught together by the same teacher. This study was guided by the research question: What are the best approaches for implementing effective academic instruction and building relationships inside a multigrade classroom? Through in-depth interviews with two experienced multigrade educators and classroom observations, this research highlights how flexible grouping, student-led routines, and long-term peer and teacher relationships contribute to both academic growth and social-emotional development.

Findings indicate that multigrade classrooms foster a culture of collaboration, differentiation, and mentorship. Teachers utilized readiness-based grouping rather than age or grade to meet individual learning needs, often moving beyond traditional pacing guides to provide instruction aligned with student mastery. Returning students played a key role in establishing classroom expectations and supporting younger peers, creating a dynamic of peer leadership that enhanced community and continuity. Additionally, strong relationships between teachers and families emerged as a central component of student success, made possible through multi-year engagement.

The study concludes that multigrade classrooms, when implemented with intention, offer a unique environment where academic and relational growth occur simultaneously. Recommendations for practice include increasing professional development specific to

multigrade instruction, promoting flexible curriculum design, and leveraging long-term teacher-student-family relationships. Future research should explore multigrade practices across diverse contexts and examine student perspectives to deepen understanding of the multigrade experience.

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Chapter I: INTRODUCTION

Overview

American education is seeing a continuous crisis on how to improve in several categories. A 2019 online article from *Education Week* (Rich, 2019) compiled a list of 10 ideas or concerns facing education in America. Among them were students feeling bored with schools and a lack of innovation in the curriculum. Schools across the country are also understaffed with certificated educators and support staff. The *National Center for Educational Statistics* reported in March 2024 that 44% of all elementary schools in the United States anticipate needing to fill teaching positions before the next school year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). The *NCES* also reports that curriculum/assessment/materials for English/Language Arts and Math is a focal point for school improvement plans for 68% and 65% of all public schools, respectively. While the American education system has seen several policy changes that have names suggesting they ensure achievement, such as No Child Left Behind and Every Student Succeeds Act, we still face persistent educational issues. *Forbes* contributing author Peter Greene (2021) argues that American schools like to throw the term "student achievement" around frequently, when in reality they are only referring to test scores and not a holistic improvement of the student or preparation for the current society. With all the resources available to American schools, there must be a discussion of why our school systems are not consistently ranking number one.

Many would argue that the education system in our country is outdated and in need of reform. Hirsch (2016) explains how America's unwillingness to make changes has failed by turning our schools into "soulless test-prep factories (2016). According to Muhammad (2015), if

we want to see a positive change in our educational system, we must be okay with the necessary discomfort needed to make growth. However, the foundation of formal schooling—early childhood education—is an apt setting to make headway toward these needed changes. In the landscape of modern education, single-grade classrooms are the most prevalent learning environment found in schools across the United States. In these classrooms, students of the same grade level are placed together to learn the same academic skills and concepts despite the multiple differing achievement levels. The learning environment is catered to serve these students with slight variation of competency or expectations. The concept of multigrade classrooms, on the other hand, stands as an alternative approach to traditional single-grade classrooms. Multigrade classrooms bring together students from different age groups and grade levels, creating dynamic learning environments that emphasize collaboration, personalized instruction, and development of the child in a holistic manner; in essence, the test kitchen for solving many of the previously mentioned woes. Despite their potential benefits, multigrade classrooms remain relatively underexplored and underutilized in mainstream education systems. This stems from an array of misconceptions and lack of understanding, both current and historic, about multigrade learning environments and the goals and roles therein.

Multigrade classrooms are designed to serve a wide range of students, which has advantages for students and the educators, including curriculum pacing (Aina, 2001), an openness to various teaching strategies (Barbieru, 2016), and an opportunity to view students as people versus data (Carter, 2005). The purpose of this study is to explore multigrade education by providing a view into these classrooms with the educators and the students. This study aims to uncover, explore, and capture the best practices associated with pedagogy, relationships, and the learning environment. By shedding light on effective instructional strategies, relationship-

building techniques, and environmental considerations within multigrade settings, this study seeks to debunk some of the myths and misunderstandings of multigrade education. This study also seeks to inform educators, policymakers, and stakeholders about how to best actualize and support the implementation of multigrade classrooms in diverse educational contexts.

Statement of the Problem

In the pursuit of understanding multigrade classrooms, several questions and wonders serve as guiding inquiries for this research. The guiding light of this research process is to demystify multigrade education by targeting several misunderstandings and myths. Seeking the best approaches for implementing effective academic instruction inside a multigrade classroom will require looking into instructional strategies, classroom design, and differentiation techniques tailored to meet the diverse needs of students across multiple grade levels while simultaneously being inside of one classroom. Studying approaches to building relationships in a multigrade classroom explores interpersonal dynamics, community-building activities, peer collaboration opportunities, and strategies for fostering a supportive and inclusive learning environment.

One of the primary challenges involving multigrade education is providing an accurate depiction of this learning model. There are many myths, mysteries, assumptions, and unknowns when it comes to what multigrade education truly entails. These challenges lead to one of the focusing questions of this research process: Why isn’t this more of a widespread approach/model for education? This question seeks to uncover the systemic barriers, misconceptions, and institutional biases that may hinder the widespread adoption and acceptance of multigrade classrooms as a viable educational model.

One challenge is how to implement, spread, scale, and sustain multigrade classroom approaches in Early Childhood Education. This question addresses the unique considerations and obstacles associated with implementing multigrade approaches at the early childhood education level, considering factors such as developmental readiness, curriculum alignment, and parental expectations.

Another question that will guide the research process is what are the challenges and rewards of teaching in a multigrade classroom? This question explores the experiences, perspectives, and professional development needs of educators who work in multigrade settings, examining both the inherent challenges and the intrinsic rewards associated with this pedagogical approach. The guiding question for this research process is: How and why do teachers in a multi-age classroom implement instruction and build relationships in their classrooms?

Purpose

Building upon the aforementioned questions, the primary objectives of this study are as follows:

- To identify, explore, and analyze effective practices related to pedagogy, relationships, and the learning environment within multigrade elementary classrooms.

- To explore the challenges, rewards, and potential scalability of multigrade classroom approaches, particularly in the context of early childhood education.

- To generate insights and recommendations that can inform policymakers, educators, and stakeholders about the benefits and feasibility of implementing multigrade classrooms as a viable educational model.

Significance of the Study

This instrumental case study seeks to explore implications for the field of education, particularly in the context of curriculum design, instructional practice, and school reform. By uncovering and documenting best practices within multigrade elementary classrooms, this study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on innovative pedagogical approaches that prioritize student-centered learning via development of young children's social and academic skills.

Furthermore, this study has the potential to inform policy discussions, professional development initiatives, and teacher training programs aimed at supporting the implementation and sustainability of multigrade classrooms in diverse educational contexts. By addressing the challenges, rewards, and systemic barriers associated with multigrade education, this research seeks to allow those directly involved with providing instruction in these environments to explain and advocate for greater recognition and acceptance of this alternative educational model as a viable option for promoting student success and fostering inclusive learning communities.

Research Plan

The plan of this study is to investigate and provide a true understanding into multigrade education by allowing those most actively involved in it, the educators and students, to provide insight via interviews and artifacts that may be provided by the teachers. Potential participants

include certificated teachers and support staff/educational assistants. These participants will need to have taught inside a multigrade classroom for at least three academic years. This timeframe means that the participant has experienced the ideal situation of having students for the entirety of the learning cycle. The researcher will conduct initial interviews with the chosen participants to gather insight and ideas on multigrade education such as what it looks like, the benefits and drawbacks, and how it is structured. Follow-Up interviews will allow the researcher to ask further probing questions about previous statements and answers. These interviews will also allow the participants to give context on specific statements and answers from previous interviews as well as allow the teacher to predict and give insight on what may be occurring during the follow-up interviews.

Definitions

This study includes terms that are directly related to the research process. The first included term, multigrade, is the one chosen for the entirety of this research process. There are several terms that are similar, including mixed-grade, multi-age, and inter-age, but multigrade was chosen for a clearer description of the learning environments. For clarity and understanding, these terms and their definitions are included below:

Multigrade classroom/education: A learning environment where multiple grade levels learn and interact inside one classroom. In this study, the classrooms will serve grades Preschool, Pre-K, and Kindergarten.

Pedagogy: The method and practice of teaching, especially as an academic subject or theoretical concept.

Preschool (student): A student who has turned three years old but will not turn four years old before the designated date set by the school/district (August 15th).

Montessori (education): An educational model that is student-led and self-paced but guided through educators or the leadership of peers. In terms of multigrade education inside the Montessori curriculum, these classrooms are usually seen in elementary settings with grades typically spanning two to three academic years.

Conclusion

The search for solutions within American education is a continuous pursuit, addressing a spectrum of challenges spanning from student performance to the growing number of certified teachers leaving the field. While no magic solution exists to resolve all educational issues, several established educational theories and concepts offer avenues for alleviating some of these concerns. Multigrade education emerges as one such strategy. This study aims to take a deeper dive into the contextual landscape of effective practices within multigrade education, alongside outlining the research methodologies and theoretical frameworks underpinning this investigation. The study aims to uncover, explore, and document the best practices within multigrade elementary classrooms concerning pedagogy, relationships, and the physical learning environment. Its objective is to provide insights to educators on realizing the potential of a multigrade elementary classroom.

The next chapters will provide background research needed for this study. The research will also include limitations and potential opportunities for scaling. Chapter 2 will focus on an overview of the history of multigrade education in the United States and several other countries across the world. This chapter will also include previous research about three key aspects of

multigrade environments: pedagogy, the multilayered relationships between students, their families, and the teacher, as well as the physical environment. Chapter 3 describes a detailed rationale for the steps that will be taken to complete the research study using a qualitative approach to analyze findings collected from participants. It also includes contextual information regarding the participants and the site of the study. Chapter 4 provides the results of the qualitative findings through the interviews and reflections. Lastly, Chapter 5 offers a proposal of next seps for how this study could serve as a foundation for the scaling of multigrade education.

Chapter II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The purpose of this study is to uncover, explore, and capture the best practices within a multi-grade elementary classroom related to pedagogy, relationships, and the physical learning environment in order to inform others about how to best actualize a multigrade elementary classroom. The literature reviewed was chosen based on appropriateness and relevance of multigrade teaching and learning for elementary aged students. The literature was synthesized and organized according to relevance to specific topics concerning multigrade classrooms. This includes exploring the history of multigrade classrooms, the definitions and the alternate names used when describing these learning environments. A thorough exploration of the academics of the multigrade classroom is detailed through previous research. The relationships seen inside multigrade classrooms are researched and highlighted through student-to-student, teacher-to-student, and teacher/school-to-family relationships. The physical space and environment are also included in this literature review by exploring previous studies and accounts of how these classrooms are designed and organized. There are also some common misconceptions regarding the general knowledge of the multiage classroom and the challenges that may be involved inside these classrooms.

Figure 2.1

History, Definitions and Alternate Names of Multigrade Classrooms

There are multiple variations and terms used to describe the type of classroom that will be researched. Some of the terms commonly used to describe this learning environment include multi-age, mixed-age (Freedman, 1981), inter-age (Olivares & Jiménez, 2015), mixed-grade, multigrade, non-graded (Mason & Stimson, 1996), or heterogeneous (Ronksley-Pavia, et. al, 2019). These terms all refer to a learning environment where students of more than one grade level, most often no more than two or three grade levels, work and learn together in one classroom for the entirety of a school year. Another common term used in education that has some correlation to this research topic is known as looping. Looping generally refers to a teacher serving a class of students at one grade level, then keeping the same class of students the

following year in the next grade level (Tourginy, et. al, 2020). Under this structure, for example, a teacher may have a class of second grade students and will keep the same group of students the following year while teaching third grade.

While these terms all have similar meanings and provide accurate context of this form of education, the term that will be used for this research is multigrade. Researchers have defined multigrade environments as a class which contains two or more grade (year) levels where one teacher has responsibility for teaching all of the children in that class, regardless of grade level (Ronksley-Pavia, et. al, 2019). This term is the most accurate description of the structure of this type of learning environment and provides a clearer definition. This term was chosen based on the fact that most classrooms are technically multi-age with students of varying ages, often no more than one- or two-year difference.

The term multigrade accurately describes the inclusion of the classroom serving more than one, typically no more than two or three consecutive grade levels. While multigrade classrooms and ideas may be unknown to most people, including those inside the world of education, the Montessori curriculum is somewhat familiar. Montessori curriculum and schools, founded by Dr. Maria Montessori, utilize multigrade groupings, particularly in elementary years. Montessori established *Casa de Bambini* in 1907. She instructed groups of young children aged two- to six-years of age together, which leads to many current Montessori learning environments teaching similarly aged student groups, stating she followed "the study of development…without clinging to the dogma about the activity of the child according to age." (p. 65)

While this educational concept may sound like a new innovative way of teaching, schools with multigrade classes are not unique or a new concept throughout the history of education. Schools all across the globe have instituted multigrade classrooms in one form or another,

including the United States. Schools and classrooms that served students of several different ages and grade levels date back to the "one room schoolhouse" of the 1800s and early 1900s (Aina, 2001). Prior to the industrial revolution and urbanization of many cities in the United States, multigrade classrooms were the most prevalent model of education. These classrooms often served a span of students from elementary to high school all at once with one teacher providing the differentiated curriculum. As the country's population began to grow, more areas of the country began to shift from small, rural towns to cities. Urbanization increased the number of students in an area, making it possible to have individualized learning environments (Freedman, 1981). Schools eventually catered to classrooms that organized students by age and instructed these students by individual grades (Veenman, 1995).

The United States has seen some states push educational reforms or initiatives that have sparked a movement of multigrade classrooms. Many times, these reforms were short-lived due to a number of factors ranging from misconceptions to standardized testing requirements. The Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) of 1990 was a direct result of the Kentucky Supreme Court's ruling that the state's educational system was ineffective and in immediate need of improvement (Houghland, Jr., 2001). One of the initiatives that came from KERA was the creation of ungraded classrooms that served students from first to third grade. The Michigan State Board of Education announced in 1994 that non-graded programs for students in multigrade classrooms would be established. These classrooms were highly successful in the state, and the department of education estimated that one in five districts had implemented multigrade classrooms (Lynch, 2018) . By 1998, more than half of Michigan's school districts had begun or were expanding their multigrade classroom models. In 1999 funding for these environments was stopped. Despite evidence that the approach helped students make progress,

the Michigan Department of Education eliminated the initiative and support for multi-age grouping. According to Michigan's board of education, the incompatibility of multi-age classrooms with the grade-level standards and annual testing were the primary reasons for discontinuation.

While the United States favors schools that are designed to teach individual grade levels, multigrade classes are still a major source of education in many suburban and rural areas across the world (Veenman, 1995; Little A. W., 2001). Veenman explains that this may be the only option for schools in small towns and villages as an economic necessity and due to teacher availability. Several countries across the globe have had variations of formal multigrade educational environments. In Turkey, multigrade classrooms are a common public school practice out of necessity due to the lack of the number of teachers and physical space, both classrooms and school buildings, available (Kardas Isler, 2022). Jardins were a form of education centers in Cuba for a brief period. Jardins were less regimented, had open planning, and were largely outdoors (Freedman, 1981). These learning environments served children 18 months to 5 years together and as one jardin psychologist explained, "We believe in inter-aged mixing. The little ones learn from the big ones and the big ones learn from the little ones—in play, in responsibility, they all learn". Freedman also details that in 1979, the Swedish Ministry of Education and Social Affairs published a report describing a learning environment in which children 7 months to 12 years of age are grouped together. In 1979, an estimated 29% of kindergarten through third-grade students were enrolled in "combination classes" (Mason & Stimson, 1996). Multigrade classrooms are popular in several African countries such as Zambia, Kenya, Uganda; Tanzania, Mali, and South Africa (Kivunja & Sims, 2015). Although not directly tied to multigrade education, the looping model which sees teachers and students

spending more than one academic year together is still a common practice in Finland (Tourginy, Plante, & Raby, 2020). Little (2005) explains that 89.2% of all public primary schools in rural areas of Peru were multigrade as well as 78% of all public primary schools. Escuela Nueva (New School) is a multigrade learning model seen in many rural areas of Colombia (Velez, 1991). Escuela Nueva was later expanded to other countries, including Brazil, Vietnam, and The Philippines (Le, 2018). In New Zealand, which boasts one of the highest literacy rates worldwide according to PISA scores from 2018 (Median & McGregor, 2023), multigrade grouping is a common educational standard (Kasten & Clarke, 1993). Japan's early childhood education systems incorporate Hoikuen institutions (Hujala, et al., 2016). These Early Childhood learning centers, which accept students as young as one month old up to five years of age. were designed under the idea that "early childhood is extremely important in cultivating a foundation for lifelong character building."

Pedagogy Inside the Multigrade Classroom

Exploring the many terms and definitions that surround this study is important for clarity and accuracy of focus for this study. Pedagogy within the multi-age classroom is the next core area of focus for this study. A major component of multigrade teaching is the academic structure provided. Consider the typical classroom, no matter the grade level, and the range of academic proficiencies of the students it serves. While this classroom is not formally a multigrade environment, the teacher must be able to differentiate their instruction to best teach the varying level of student abilities. Because these classrooms are created with multiple grade levels in mind already, multigrade classrooms will have the materials, resources, and curriculum readily available to deliver scaffolded instruction. The multigrade environment allows students to remain with the same teacher as well as a large group of peers over multiple school years.

One of the highest expectations of any school, no matter the philosophy or classroom environment, is to provide students with quality educational experiences. The multigrade environment is no different than any other school's expectations. Multigrade classrooms are designed to serve a wide range of students, which has advantages for students and the educators. While the current curriculum design in most of our schools can address what is generally expected of a student at a particular grade and/or age, many do not often address their unique development as learners and thinkers. The learning rates for children in kindergarten through second grade span a broad spectrum, and growth is often sporadic versus steady (Ventura, 1993). Veenman (1995) details one of the greatest advantages of multigrade is the ability for younger and lower performing students to advance academically due to exposure to the varying levels of curriculum. The multigrade classrooms typically will not be limited to one grade level of standards that is taught (Aina, 2001). While students will always interact with one another no matter the class structure, the multigrade environment allows the students to interact with one another academically in multiple ways and for extended periods of time. Students may collaborate and work on the same or similar tasks, or they may serve as a "mentor" for younger peers.

Gnadinger (2008) explains how peer collaboration is a viable strategy for instruction inside the classroom, highlighted by cooperative learning. Cooperative instruction involves the students providing instruction to one another. This study explains a classroom where peer-to-peer learning was prevalent, with Gnadinger noticing that the students "taught" one another in a similar method as the classroom teacher. The multigrade classroom allows students of various ages, grade levels, and comprehension levels to provide instruction to one another. This model of collaboration and learning is an expectation in the multigrade classroom with the older or more

proficient students, regardless of age or grade level, assist with academic skills and standards. Many researchers suggest this as an effective strategy for all learners, especially the benefits that both the peer "teacher" and "student" receive academically from the collaboration (Devin-Sheehan, Feldman, & Allen, 1976; Gerber & Kauffman, 1981; Hill, 1982; Kalfus, 1984; Peterson & Janicki, 1979).

Veenman (1995) corroborates the benefits of cooperative instruction. Because of the varied and scaffolded academic skills and standards and the necessary materials that are taught in the classroom, the students are able to assist one another and collaboratively extend or review these skills. The self-esteem and comprehension of older students who may not be able to quickly grasp more difficult academic skills and concepts may also benefit from helping teach younger peers. Lynch (2018) agrees, explaining that implementing and encouraging regular peer-to-peer academic interactions, not only builds confidence in children, can help resolve learning challenges of students who struggle academically, and builds critical thinking skills. Kobelin (2009) details an instance inside a multigrade classroom where a student assisted his peers with a math strategy. The student created a chart with numbers counting up in one column and numbers counting down in a second column, which was quickly adopted by peers who wound up working together to develop charts for similar math skills. Veenman (1995) lays out a collection of benefits that advocates of multigrade education have argued for. Among them are:

- The self-concepts of slower, older students are enhanced when they are asked to tutor younger students in their class.
- Multi-age/multigrade grouping invites cooperation and other forms of prosocial behavior and thus appears to minimize competitive pressures and the need for discipline.

- Current concepts of cognitive development (e.g., the zone of proximal development and cognitive conflict) imply that children whose knowledge or abilities are similar but not identical can stimulate each other's thinking and cognitive growth.

The students' collaborative learning allows students to serve as a "teacher" to their peers at various times, and this group interaction may enhance cooperative skills. Vygotsky (1978) explains that knowledge is formed and scaffolded via interactions among individuals and then becomes internalized. Vygotsky's theory of the Zone of Proximal Development is especially noticeable inside multigrade classrooms. This theory focuses on the space between what a learner has already learned and mastered (actual level of development) and what they are able to achieve when provided with efficient educational support (potential development). The "masters" or proficient students are able to assist in filling the gaps for their peers' potential learning and development. Slavin (2015) believes that students will participate in these assignments and help one another learn because they want to see each other succeed.

Independence inside the classroom is also a key factor in multigrade classrooms. According to Mulryan-Kyne (2004) this environment cultivates the development of independent learning skills by encouraging students to take the initiative in making decisions about their learning. Self-directed learning can have long term effects by promoting both problem-solving and critical-thinking skills and autonomy. Montessori classrooms are designed to allow individual students to progress at his or her own pace. Teachers inside these learning environments are mindful of presenting lessons to students and then allowing students to explore and work with the materials with limited interruption. Materials inside the classroom are designed and used to encourage this individualized learning. Dr. Montessori explains that the students are not only allowed to choose their learning, within some boundaries set forth by the

teacher, they are also encouraged to select where they will work inside the classroom (Montessori, 2008). Aside from academic-specific lessons, examples of these lessons include practical life activities, such as using utensils or common household items like tweezers. The students are introduced and instructed to new learning materials, skills, and concepts as he or she is ready, fostering intrinsic motivation and independent learning. Vygotsky (1978) is also a proponent of this, especially with children in the zone of proximal development. His belief is that this guided instruction allows effective development and promotes the child to begin to learn independently.

Teachers can find the continuation of having students for multiple years to be beneficial. When students return to the same classroom and teacher the following school year, the familiarity of the environment may allow them to begin working on new academic skills quicker since there should not be as much time spent with acclimation (Bailey, et al., 2016). A study from Bailey, et al. (2016) explains that teachers who worked with a group of students over more than one academic year felt more empowered to better serve their students' needs. While planning for multiple grades may seem burdensome, there may be some advantages when it comes to differentiation. According to McCarthey, et al (1996), because multigrade educators are more likely to see the children in their class as individuals with diverse needs and already expect academically and developmentally, they have planned and are prepared to provide appropriate learning situations that address these diverse needs. Because there are likely to be more students who meet at the same place on the academic spectrum, the teacher is more likely to be able to instruct a small group rather than one individual.

In *Cooperative Learning in Elementary Schools* (2015), Slavin explains that most multigrade teachers are not committed to a tiered structure of learning that is catered to a specific

grade level, allowing students to receive and work on lessons at the necessary level to promote the individual's growth. The multigrade environment enables a teacher's ability to respond to individual student capabilities by providing remediated or advanced lessons in a discreet manner (Little A. , 2005). Kobelin (2009) provides a firsthand account of a multigrade teacher who believes this learning environment made her a better teacher due to the necessity of planning and providing differentiated instruction for her students. Mcintyre, et al. (1996) provides an account of teachers in Kentucky having to implement multigrade classrooms due to the Kentucky Education Reform Act. These ten teachers explained that while the process was difficult, they felt that they ended up with a better understanding of how to differentiate instruction inside the classroom. These teachers also believed that they were more efficient in planning and implementing small group lessons for their students due to the necessity of the multigrade environment. Lloyd (1999) contends that the implementation of multigrade classrooms would not only be beneficial for high-performing students but would also benefit the wide spectrum of students while also being financially advantageous for schools.

A further benefit of the multiage approach relates to language acquisition and development, a crucial part of young children's academic development. Little (2001) explains that higher rates of language exchanges occur among students in multigrade classrooms, leading to higher language development among students in these environments. In Gnadinger's studies (2008), she explains that the students emulated their teacher, assisting one another with similar methods to those used by the classroom teacher. Learning how to speak, volume control, vocabulary, word context and conversation skills occur throughout the various conversations and activities that the students engage one another in. Children learn vocabulary in settings with a variety of age groups (Freedman, 1981). Wiebe Berry (2006) explains how the various

conversations and activities in which the students engage inside the classroom and how the acquisition and development of language is beneficial through the interactions of younger and older students.

Research shows that a student paired with an effective teacher for a single school year may gain up to a full year's worth of additional academic growth (Weisberg, et al., 2009). Having the same effective teacher for two or three years consecutively could prove to be especially beneficial for student outcomes. In *An Idea Whose Time Has Come?* (Torrence, 2012), a Montessori educator explains how their multigrade setting encourages the kind of questioning and thinking that promotes lifelong learning. The Montessori classrooms educate students in 3-year cycles, offering the opportunity for students to be a beginner or an upstart novice, who is noticing and beginning to learn by observing their peers who are older and more experienced. Buschman (2003) provides an example of younger children and their older peers participating in a spelling activity which benefits both. The younger students learn via mentoring by their older peers; the older children are challenged as spellers, writers, and communicators to "teach" their younger peers. The author follows this example by quoting, "You never fully understand something until you try to explain it to someone else."

Relationships Inside Multigrade Classrooms

The multigrade classroom allows students and teachers to work together for more than one academic year as well. In traditional single-grade settings, students may be lucky enough to be placed together in the same classroom with some of their peers in the following grade. In the multigrade setting, students will stay together for two or three years unless there is an extenuating circumstance. They may also be placed with one another in another classroom after leaving the multigrade classroom. Relationships that are developed and built within a multigrade

classroom are multi-layered. The included chart demonstrates the multiple connections that are established involving teachers/school, the students, and their families.

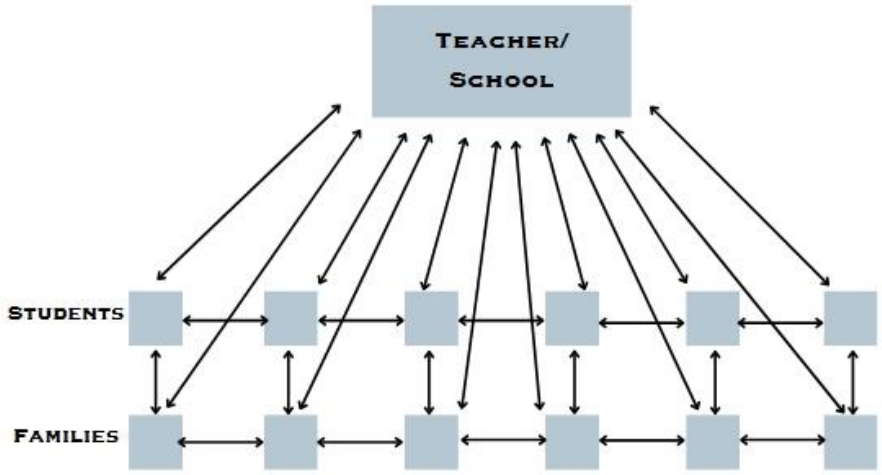

Figure 2.2

The relationships built inside a multigrade classroom extend beyond academics. According to *Peer Mediated Instruction* (Gnadinger, 2008) students help and support one another in a classroom setting "by examining the social nature of learning within the Vygotskian perspective that human cognitive development occurs through social interaction mediated by

language" (p. 130). Vygotsky (1978) explains how social experiences shape the ways of thinking and interpreting the world.

Song et. al., (2009) explain that both students and teachers in multigrade, elementary classrooms felt more relaxed, calm, and comfortable than those in single-age classrooms on the first day of school because of familiarity with their peers and the environment. This familiarity allows the teacher and students to mutually create the learning environment. This collaboration between the students and teachers builds a sense of community that spreads into multiple aspects of the learning environment (Gnadinger, 2008). Creating a sense of community enables new students to quickly become socialized to expectations, routines, and norms of behavior. Previous research (Mcintyre, et al., 1996) explains that this community also conveyed to the children that their teachers encourage and expect them to help one another inside the classroom. Gnadinger explains a truly interactive learning community is not built on isolated groups of students "who already know information" and others who are "taught this information," instead it is built on authentic respect for all of those involved. Hierck (2016) explains how mutual respect between the teacher(s) and the students is one of the most effective factors in establishing a positive learning environment. He further explains this mutual respect promotes better behavior and communication inside the classroom.

In the article *A Comfortable Start for Everyone* (Fu, et al., 1999)**,** the authors provide firsthand accounts of student interactions inside a multigrade classroom. The premise of this article highlights how a classroom is a community of learners who explore together and help each other grow. In this classroom of Kindergarten through second grade students, they explain how Kindergarteners learn the classroom routines via both direct and indirect student-to-student interactions. Direct interactions included one of the older students explaining to the new students

that they needed to clean up their work areas before lining up and another occasion where older students helped their peers complete a lunch choice form. Indirectly, the Kindergarten students learned where to place their folders in the classroom as well as following "the procedures they saw used by older children as they continued their reading and writing while munching on their snacks." McIntyre, et. al., (1996) provide additional examples of student-to-student social relationships, detailing community-building skills set forth by the teacher and followed through by the students. They note that students were helpful with one another, including an example of older students gathering materials for other students when they noticed their peers did not have what was needed for the next lesson.

The multiage classroom also provides an additional opportunity for students to be both the novice and the expert (McCarthey, et al., 1996). As students first enter the multiage classroom, they begin to learn the routines and structure of the classroom. Having spent multiple years in the same environment and, ideally, with the same teacher, they not only know the expectations, but also help reinforce and model them. Fu, et. al., (1999) describe that Kindergarten students may walk in shy and timid but transform into confident learners who take on roles of responsibility and leadership by the time they are second grade students in the same classroom. Reid & Ready (2013) explain how interactions are stimulating and nurturing to young students, citing Vygotsky's work on how children's learning, both cognitive and noncognitive, are rooted in social interactions. Veenman (1995) corroborates this idea, specifically related to multigrade classrooms by highlighting the opportunities for students to interact with a wider spectrum of peers. These varied relationships lead to a greater sense of belonging, support, security, and confidence which help enable students to live in a complex and ever-changing social world. Veenman also explains how multigrade grouping offers a two-way opportunity for

social interactions. The younger students are able to observe and imitate a wide range of behaviors while the older students are able to assume responsibility for less mature and less knowledgeable students.

There are additional benefits that emerge from the extended relationships between the teacher and their students. Long-term stability fosters a better learning environment and can help reduce learning anxiety (Tourginy, et. al., 2020). This prolonged interaction allows teachers to better understand their students and what their academic strengths and areas of refinement are. As previously mentioned, students may gain up to a full year's worth of additional academic growth when paired with an effective teacher for a single school year (Weisberg, et al., 2009). Fu, et. al., (1999) describes how this setting allows teachers and students to work together over a period of time and deepens the teacher's knowledge of students' academic needs. Supporters of multigrade education also contend these classrooms encourage the academic success of children by reducing the rigid expectations often seen in single-grade classrooms. A study of fourth- and sixth-grade students in Quebec who stayed with their teacher for multiple years found that two consecutive school years of consistency is associated with better achievement scores in mathematics and writing (Tourginy, Plante, & Raby, 2020). Moreover, a study with teachers in multigrade classrooms found that working with young children over several years provides a unique opportunity to see the children grow and develop in unique ways (Mcintyre, et al., 1996). Tourginy, et, al. (2020) provides qualitative research results which state that the long-term relationship between teachers and their students in classrooms where students learn from the same teacher for more than one year is particularly useful especially for students with special needs.

Aina (2001) explains that while single-grade schools and classrooms focus primarily on the instructional model that teaching is transmitted to the learner, multigrade environments focus on the interactive aspect of the teacher–student relationship, quoting previous research by Maria Montessori, Jean Piaget, and Howard Gardner. A positive relationship between a teacher and students – evidenced by a high degree of closeness and support – has been shown to reduce students' behavioral problems (Tourginy, et. al, 2020). This study also finds that this positive interaction can improve students' social skills, long-term academic efforts, and performance. Teachers who better understand their students may also be better equipped to deal with their social and emotional needs. One educator and counselor states that a singular relationship with a caregiver throughout one's life can positively alter "the brain's development, heal trauma, and promote learning" (Marcus, n.d.).

Another benefit to students in a multiage classroom is reflection of society and the real world (Stuart, et. al, 2006). When children interact with others in society outside of school, whether in their neighborhoods or with their families, they generally are not divided by a specific age group. An article from a Montessori educator (Torrence, 2012) details how a multigrade, Montessori classroom is a community in which social problems naturally arise. These challenges are resolved naturally, through use of "grace and courtesy" skills. Montessori teachers share and exemplify these skills from the earliest age: how to say, "good morning" and look someone in the eye; how to politely interrupt someone; how to walk carefully and respectfully around a peer's work so that she or he is not disturbed. These skills are transferred to the students, who use them as they interact with one another throughout the learning day.

There are additional aspects of the multigrade learning environment that extend beyond the walls of the classroom and the school building. Every student in any classroom has to also

interact with their own family, and the teachers in these classrooms are aware that they must also have some form of relationship with their students' families. Among the 10 standards that the National Association for the Education of Young Children (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024) lists on their website, the first is "relationships", while "families" and "community relationships" also enter their list. A positive relationship between the teacher and family can be advantageous. These advantages would be even more evident and necessary in disadvantaged communities, where parents and guardians may not be able to provide adequate stability. However, there has been little empirical research linking teacher-student relationships in multi-year environments compared to traditional one-year school settings (Tourginy, et. al, 2020).

The necessity of communication between teachers, schools, and families is highlighted by *Exploring Factors of the Parent-Teacher Partnership Affecting Learning Outcomes* (Syuraini, et. al, 2022). The authors explain that the collaboration that is essential between these members are two-way streets of information which allow insight into the child's life in hopes of providing a proper and effective path toward growth. In an article reposted by NAEYC, Epstein (2010) identified six principal factors of parental participation in early childhood education. These factors are parenting, communicating, volunteering in classrooms, decision-making, and collaborating with the community. Epstein & Sanders (2006) explain that students learn more and succeed at higher levels when home, school, and community work together to support students' learning and development.

The prolonged period of teaching and learning with one another in multigrade classrooms can be beneficial for the bonds created between the teacher, school, and students' families. Song (2009) and Carter (2005) both discuss the connection that can be created and how the continuity

and familiarity can be advantageous for all involved. Other research has suggested that this continuity can also help increase parental involvement in their child's academics. Nichols & Nichols (2002) explain that this level of relationship allows both the teacher and the family to discuss and reflect on the growth that the child is experiencing over their time together. Those involved are also more likely to collaborate on reasonable and proper goals as the relationship continues. The teachers in multigrade classrooms are typically more familiar with their students and their home lives, which also helps them understand certain aspects of the child's day in the classroom and their interactions with peers. Ventura (1993) explains how this learning model also facilitates a closer working relationship between the teachers, school, and the parents while they continue to work together for the students. Freedman (1981) details how some multigrade educators also explain the increased stimulation and motivation that the environment provides to push harder for a stronger relationship with their students' families. Other researchers such as Grace (2022) agree that a positive teacher-parent relationship will encourage increased family engagement. Miller (1994) also explains how the continuity and familiarity between teachers and students' families can increase the potential for parental involvement in the school. *Teaching Young Readers and Writers in Multi-Age Classrooms* (Mcintyre, et al., 1996) provides a first-hand account of one educator's experience and joy of the relationship built, stating:

> One of the neatest things that only a teacher living the primary program can know is the wonderful connectedness that develops with the child and his or her family when the parents are working with you for the good of the child. It is like becoming part of their families. It doesn't happen with every child, but it happens more often than not. Having a child more than one year helps tremendously (p. 393).

This continuity also serves as a base for trust between the teacher and the families. Teachers and families who have a better understanding of one another are often able to have mutual understanding of the child. Conversations about the child's academic and social skills can be

authentic, including difficult conversations. Researchers have explained how this cooperation between teachers and parents regarding children's weaknesses, whether physical, mental, or learning difficulties can aid with children's home lives (Syuraini, et. al, 2022). Grace and J. (2022) explain that simply involving the family in conversations surrounding a student's progress and goal setting can promote motivation for collaboration in student's lives.

There are accounts of parents expressing excitement and lauding the benefits of long-term relationships between their child, the family, and the teacher. In *Teacher and Parent Perspectives on Looping* (Hegde & Cassidy, 2004), one parent stated:

> Looping is a very good idea and it is very essential for the development of the child. Consistency that comes with looping is essentially very advantageous to the child. The caregiver has a good understanding of the child, knows the child's temperament, wants, strengths and weaknesses (p. 134).

Because younger children may have a more challenging time effectively expressing their thoughts or feelings, the long-term relationship established inside a multigrade classroom can help bridge some of the potential misunderstandings that may come from the line of communication between school and home.

Physical Environment Inside Multigrade Classrooms

Educational theorists such as Bandura, Vygotsky, Piaget, and Montessori have explained the importance of the environment students learn in (Vygotsky, 1978; Montessori, 2008). Exploring the environment of a multigrade classroom requires the exploration of the physical environment. The physical part of this section will explain what the classroom looks like and how the environment is set up and designed. Some multigrade classrooms are physically indistinguishable from traditional classrooms in appearance with students working at individual

desks or small groups at tables, posters and student work displayed on the walls, and textbooks available for students to work with. Some multigrade classrooms have several unique features, such as classroom learning materials, student movement and seating. With Montessori classrooms being one of the most prevalent examples of multigrade education, there are several examples of how these classrooms are specifically designed and organized for the students.

One standout example of how multigrade classrooms look is the Montessori classroom. In her book *The Absorbent Mind* (1988), Dr. Montessori explains that education "is a natural process which develops spontaneously… in virtue of experiences in which the child acts on his environment" (p. 8). These learning environments typically have several unique features that not only are specifically in place for a multigrade learning experience, but that also distinguish them from a traditional classroom. These classrooms usually follow Dr. Montessori's theory of a "prepared environment" for young children to learn (Gettman, 1987). This environment is designed for the child to move about and gain independence while simultaneously stimulating their mind. The furniture, including everything from sitting areas, tables, and shelves, are sized for the students inside that classroom. Montessori explains her thoughts behind the design for these classroom items in her book *The Montessori Method* (2008). Montessori classrooms, especially ones serving younger students, often see large, carpeted areas of the room, if not the entire classroom. Chairs are generally small enough that children's feet are able to touch the floor as they sit. Shelves are low enough that children are easily able to see any contents on the top shelf. The teacher may even have a small chair or stool so they are able to move around the room. This mobility allows them to not only move around to multiple students, but the stool also sits closer to a child's eye level, providing the child with less need to look up at the teacher. Inside elementary Montessori classes, it is common to see students working on a small,

individual rug placed on the floor instead of sitting at a desk or table. The environment is also set up for students to be able to interact with their classroom and learning materials versus being stationed at a specific seat or table.

Montessori classrooms typically rely heavily on the use of manipulatives for students to use while learning. *Maximizing Learning in Early Childhood Multiage Classrooms* (Aina, 2001) highlights principles that undergird multigrade learning environments. Among these principles are that children learn best when they are taught through an integrated curriculum that allows for pattern-building and selection of a wide variety of sensory data and when the classroom is organized, yet flexible. This researcher also explains that young children learn best when they are able to interact with the environment and with people. The learning materials used in the Montessori model can be a beneficial for multigrade classes because these materials are always scaled for children (Kardas Isler, 2022). Students inside these multigrade Montessori classrooms are not restricted to materials based solely on their grade. A three-year old student may be allowed to work with a group of materials that teaches skip counting if the teacher feels they are ready. Likewise, a first-grade student who needs assistance with identifying letters has learning materials readily available to work with. This article also highlights how Emilio Reggia and Montessori philosophies encourage the physical classroom itself to become a resource for student learning. The Montessori classroom is arranged for movement and to allow students to easily select learning tasks by having materials in subject-specific areas throughout the room. Students will be able to find math materials in one area while language arts materials are separated into another area of the room. Many early childhood learning environments, such as daycares or Pre-K classrooms, follow a similar model with learning “centers.”

While math, language arts, science, and social studies areas of the classroom are a necessity inside Montessori classrooms, there are also often additional areas that promote practical life and sensorial learning tasks. Practical life materials and tasks are useful to promote concentration, hand-eye coordination, social awareness, and self-esteem in young children (Bush & Sciaraffa, 2019). Examples of practical life materials include using funnels to pour liquids, lacing, or buttoning clothing items, and using common objects such as tweezers, spoons, or liquid droppers. These lessons allow students to practice skills and tasks that they may see at home or in other societal settings, giving them a connection and an opportunity to practice real-world duties. Sensorial examples include identifying scents using smelling jars, comparing rough and smooth textures and matching sounds with shakers.

Movement throughout the classroom inside the Montessori environment is not only accepted but also encouraged and designed to happen. Bărbieru (2016) explains how allowing the child to move freely in the environment allows the educator to truly see the child's application of learning and potential. Movement in this environment is not limited to simple acts like walking to a door or getting in a line. Students get to choose their work area, walk to gather their learning materials multiple times a day, and have to return them to their original location after each use. In *Multiage Instruction and Inclusion* (Stuart, et. al, 2006), the teachers of an elementary classroom of students aged six to nine do not take a "sit quietly" approach to learning, but this does not mean that the classroom is noisy and chaotic. The researchers explain, "'noisy movement' can be disconcerting and can cancel out the positive elements that is intended through the allowed free movement. Our classroom is quiet and organized with calculated movement interwoven in the day." Similar to what was described in the Montessori environment, this article also explains how students may complete assignments and work in non-traditional

areas, such as working on rugs, standing at desks versus sitting, or even a classroom sofa. Kardas Isler (2022) explains how freedom of movement and the autonomy to select where a student works increases the child's already existing learning interest.

While schools and classrooms across the country are typically tasked with providing differentiated instruction to students, multigrade classrooms are readily designed to provide students with this instruction. Researchers highlight the usage of learning centers and study projects, both independent and shared, in multigrade classrooms as beneficial. In *Classroom Strategies of Multigrade Teachers* (Napran & Alisung, 2021), the teacher participants explain a classroom strategy known as High 5 Reading Strategy, in which the pupils are engaged in different activities that are suited to their level of knowledge. The previously mentioned Montessori classrooms and their manipulatives are a perfect example of this. These classrooms often have materials for different subjects that allow students to select different, appropriate tasks to complete based on their needs. These learning environments also help foster an independence of learning by encouraging students to select their own tasks within a controlled boundary (Torrence, 2012). *The Student-Centered Classroom* (Jones, 2007) explains that this time of students working independently allows the teacher to become a facilitator for learning by providing time to monitor student work with minimal interruption. This model of learning and observation has also been supported by educational experts such as Vygotsky and Montessori. It is common to see teachers moving around the room, navigating between individual students or small groups while observing what students are doing. In these instances, teachers may be seen documenting what students are doing so they can provide feedback after the task is completed. Some teachers may opt to observe their students from a stationary spot in the room while documenting what students are doing in order to provide feedback.

While these aspects of the multigrade classrooms are beneficial for the students, there are teachers who work in these environments who also find it beneficial. According to *Teaching and Learning in Multigrade Classrooms* (Mulryan-Kyne, 2004), many teachers also find the multigrade setting stimulating and an interesting setting in which to work. The researcher explains how the variety of learning materials and an atmosphere that is generally busy and productive are some of the positive features of multigrade classes mentioned by teachers. Little (2001) describes that effective multigrade teaching utilizes a range of organizational strategies in the classroom. These strategies include the use of whole class teaching, small group, peer-to-peer, and independent learning. Stuart, et. al., (2006) further explain similar strategies, including how collaborative, student-led small groups are also common in these classrooms.

Multigrade classrooms also may see the usage of multiple educators inside the classroom. Miller (1994) explains how multiple teachers inside the classroom can be beneficial for students as well as the teachers. *The Modern Multi-Age Classroom* (Carter, 2005) details an educator in Las Vegas who collaborates with a co-teacher to serve a classroom serving first-, second- and third-grade students. The educator explains the benefits of supporting one another through problem-solving and reflection. This article also explains how during instructional time, one teacher may be working with a small group of students while the other is providing a large-group discussion. Due to the necessity of providing instruction to more than one grade level, collaboration amongst teachers is vital.

Multigrade environments also readily lend themselves to structure and improvisation inside the classroom. Although the students are receiving instruction and lessons at several diverse levels, often all at once, there is a structure that is implemented and maintained in order for the classroom to have an effective flow. In the book *Structure and Improvisation in Creative*

Teaching (Sawyer, 2011), the author explains that structure and improvisation work together through three paradoxes: teacher paradox, learning paradox and curriculum paradox. These aspects all require a structure to be implemented by the teacher while also allowing for room to swiftly make revisions that will not impede the learning inside the classroom. Every classroom requires flexibility, problem-solving and adaptability from teachers and students. This is especially true inside the multigrade classroom where students are less likely to be simultaneously engaged in the same activities or learning objectives. The teacher must be able to creatively manage and design a proper flow to the classroom schedule, layout, and instructional planning. The independent skills that students learn inside the classroom allows the structure to be effective, providing the teacher(s) the ability to move around the room as necessary to assist with students or to merely observe student learning.

Misconceptions, Pushbacks, and Challenges of Multigrade Classrooms

While no model of education is foolproof, there are some common educational misconceptions and challenges that arise in multigrade education. The multigrade classroom also lends itself to some unique and specific issues. While this model of education is not new, there is still unfamiliarity with the various aspects of multigrade education. This unfamiliarity leads to misunderstandings and misconceptions. Some researchers have also produced studies that say multigrade education is not beneficial for students, both academically and social-emotionally. Montessori classrooms are one of the most popular versions of multigrade environments, and there are common false beliefs that involve these classrooms. Among these challenges, academic growth and behavior of students are two of the most commonly researched topics. Teacher challenges, including frustrations and issues with planning and instruction delivery, are also further explored in this section.

Misconceptions

One of the most commonly spread misconceptions of multigrade classrooms is that the environments are unstructured. This is an especially common misunderstanding surrounding Montessori classrooms. Some previous research regarding multigrade environments finds these environments may have been created out of necessity and without proper implementation and guidance for the teacher(s) and students (Fu, et al., 1999; Veenman, 1995). These failed implementations created long-lasting beliefs that the environment was ineffective and detrimental to teachers and students. If parents are not knowledgeable of the learning model and how it is structured, they are unlikely to understand the how and why of the setup. If the educator never takes the time to explain and offer any information, there is little acknowledgment and acceptance of how the multigrade environment operates.

Some researchers believe that the academics and instruction provided inside these classrooms are less effective and rigorous than what is seen inside the traditional, single grade classroom. Mason and Burns (1996) claim that instruction in these classes is less effective, and the negative outcomes are camouflaged since the classrooms have higher achievers and more experienced teachers. These researchers also claim children in multigrade classrooms may exhibit fewer gains learning and development since teachers may provide students with less challenging content in order to accommodate the wide variety of abilities and skill levels. They believe this environment ultimately leads to older and more skilled children being disengaged. Slaton (1997) provides examples of educators who contend that a multigrade environment may not be beneficial for all of the students. These educators believe that the Kindergarten experience is special and should be preserved in isolation of combining it with multiple grade levels.

Pushbacks

Some researchers find the multigrade learning environment to be a detriment to academics and instruction. Some educators fear that peer collaboration places too much emphasis on the less capable child while ignoring the needs of the more capable child (Allan, 1991; Rogers, 1993). Slaton (1997) explains how some educators linked to multi-age grouping expressed concern and alarm that some students' needs would not be met by teachers who were required to accommodate and plan for a wider span of development and achievement inside their classroom. Rogers also contends that there is no academic benefit for gifted learners who are in multigrade settings. Other researchers agree that higher achieving students may find little to no benefit in a multigrade setting (Connor, et. al, 2006). Slaton also suggests that the forced assignments for both teachers and students in multiage classrooms might contribute to negative academic outcomes in some situations. This research also finds educators who indicated concern about inadequate challenges for older students and how those students might spend excessive time tutoring younger peers inside the classroom. Mason and Burns (1996) contend that students in these multi-grade classrooms may not be challenged due to the teacher's need to provide a widespread range of academic lessons and activities based on the skill levels of the students inside the classroom.

Previous studies from Ansari (2017) and Moller, et. al (2008) show that students inside a classroom with a larger range of mixed-age groups performed lower on assessments than similarly aged students who learn inside a classroom with a smaller range of ages. Ansari also provides a study which suggests that kindergarten students inside multigrade classrooms with prekindergartners performed lower academically than students who attended kindergarten-only classrooms. Researchers who studied a Head Start program discovered that 4-year-old students

who were enrolled in a classroom with a larger number of younger peers performed worse on assessments of math and literacy than 4-year-olds who attended classrooms with fewer younger children (Ansari, et. al, 2016).

Challenges

Freedman (1981) states that it is probably most efficient to teach lessons and provide assignments for a group of similarly aged students versus planning and providing instruction or multiple grade-levels. Mulryan-Kyne (2004) described that multigrade teachers have explained they can feel overloaded with curriculum decisions due to having to provide instruction to more than one grade level simultaneously. The whole group activities inside a multi-grade classroom must be more carefully chosen and small groups more carefully arranged in order to be effective and reach a wide range of students. A study from Irish teachers (Mulryan-Kyne, 2004) saw that 70% of the teachers felt they were not able to provide a sufficient amount of time to the different grade levels. They felt their students were able to receive some quality instruction inside this learning model but reading and mathematics instruction particularly suffered in the multigrade model.

Most teachers were concerned that they did not have sufficient time to spend with each grade level in each subject area. Teachers often end up providing less individualized attention and less challenging content to older children in the classroom in the multigrade classroom according to Mason and Burns. There is some concern about younger children who might not receive the necessary attention for mastery of basic skills they need during their first years of school. Slaton (1997) highlights the concerns of a teacher in this type of classroom, quoting, "Multi-age and multi-ability classrooms of twenty-four children make teaching very difficult. This sounds nice and looks pretty on paper; however, time will tell if these children are being

helped or harmed (p. 11)". Another teacher mentioned that multigrade groupings resulted in "organized frustration" for everyone involved. Teachers in multigrade classrooms may also have a more challenging time managing children who display a wide range of academic and behavioral skills (Ansari, 2017). Consequently, these teachers may have less time to dedicate to whole group and small group instruction and, instead, may spend a greater amount of time on classroom management and discipline, which may slow children's academic growth.

In a study from Veenman (1995) of multigrade classrooms in Canada, principals and teachers with multigrade experience expressed several potential issues, among them; integration of the curriculum, individualization and adjusting instruction, lack of time for adequate teaching of certain subjects, and the need to attend to the one grade while instruction is being given to the other grade. A study from Walsh (1989) about an urban public school district in Connecticut with previous multigrade experience that found the teachers, students, and parents all agreed that they would not choose the multigrade structure again. The primary reasons for their decision included the need for well-trained teachers, mature and independent students of average to high ability, and limited class size. These participants also suggested that the multigrade model should only be implemented in third- and fourth-grade classes or fourth- and fifth-grade classes.

These researchers also argue that the behavior issues that may arise from younger students may pull the needed attention away from the entire group, which results in less effective lesson implementation. Students also suffer when they are not able to receive the necessary individual attention on their academic progress if the teacher is managing the behaviors of their younger peers. Veenman (1995) does not believe there are negative effects, but states that there is no significant difference in the quality of instruction between multigrade and single grade classes. This is only true if the class size is manageable, and teachers employ appropriate

methods of instruction. Mariano and Kirby (2009) conducted a quasi-experimental analysis of elementary schools in the Los Angeles School District, concluding that multigrade classrooms had a negative (roughly 10% of a standard deviation) effect on student achievement.

The relationships built over multiple years between students are not always automatically positive and beneficial. Slavin (2015) contends that the quality of the group's interactions is thought to be largely determined by group cohesion. If the foundation of the relationships are not forged with the belief that community is important, then the opportunity afforded to learn with one another for multiple years is wasted and can be harmful. Hartup (1989) found that the greatest positive social interaction occurred in same-age older pairs, the least in same age younger pairs, with mixed-age pairs falling in between. He observes, "The study only establishes the fact that both younger and older preschool children make behavioral adjustments to the cross-age situation. In each case, behavior differs from the same-age situation." Although the student ages may only range two or three years apart, the behaviors and needs of students may cause some issues amongst students. Older students may begin to exhibit more independence and autonomy, while the younger students are needy and require more individualized attention. Veenman (1995) states that these needs may cause some tension amongst students and can have negative effects on the learning environment.

Researchers (Tourginy, et. al, 2020) found another aspect that should be considered is the potential for relationships that produce negative or conflictual issues. These problems may evolve over an extended period of time, possibly if students become too familiar with their teacher. Students or teachers that do not get along after one year may face continuous disadvantages in a multigrade setting. Mulryan-Kyne (2004) found that about one-third of the

teachers similarly believed that teachers were concerned with having to deal with a possible behavior issue for multiple years.

A study of multigrade teachers in Ireland (Mulryan-Kyne, 2004) found that 39% of these teachers felt that older students were at a disadvantage because of the distractions caused by younger students. This same study found that teachers also believed that one disruptive student had a larger effect on the overall class environment than it would in a single-grade classroom. Some of these educators express worry about the older students who are asked to "mentor" in these environments, explaining that all students may not be appropriately challenged, or the setup of mentoring may limit their time to adequately learn the curriculum.

One obvious disadvantage is the possibility of multiple academic years with an ineffective teacher. Hegde & Cassidy (2004) quote one parent's concern over potential bad fits with a teacher that does not connect by stating, "The only potential disadvantage that I can envision is that of not having a good relationship with the caregiver and getting stuck with that caregiver because he/she is looping with your child. That may complicate things further and the parent may want to move the child. . ." (p. 137). Previously stated research from Weisberg, et. al (2009), states that effective teachers can promote an additional year's growth in their students. Conversely, an ineffective teacher may not only stunt growth, but potentially reverse student outcomes. In the same article, other parents who participated were worried that the continuous relationship may prevent their child from having different experiences they would receive from other teachers and classmates. Misaligned beliefs between the teacher, school, and the family are a disadvantage at any level, but can be especially harmful over multiple years.

Summary

The literature and research reviewed provides a framework that highlights the primary avenues that will be further explored through this research. The academics and pedagogy implemented, the relationships formed and created, and the environment and how the classroom looks are the main focuses of this project. The referenced studies build a compelling case for a more widespread and frequent usage of multigrade classrooms in Early Education. As the country increasingly understands and invests in Early Childhood Education, there is room for improvement to the learning model in order to better provide students with the proper foundation for their academic journey. While the American education system has seen several policy changes that have names suggesting they ensure achievement, such as No Child Left Behind and Every Student Succeeds Act, we still face the same educational challenges. Hirsch (2016) explains how America's unwillingness to make changes has failed by turning our schools into "soulless test-prep factories." To begin to see change, one way forward for American school systems could be to embrace authentic student-centered curriculum.

Multigrade education in Early Childhood Education is one possible solution to issues the United States' educational system is facing. Any changes or innovative ideas surrounding education must require change, and according to Muhammad (2015), if we want to see a positive change in our educational system, we must be okay with the necessary discomfort to make growth. Grant and Johnson (1995) explain that implementation of these unique learning environments can be successful, encouraging districts or schools to "think big and start small" by employing small, manageable phases. This idea of thinking aligns with previous ideas from Collins and Hansen (2011) that schools should "fire bullets, not cannonballs" when making

changes versus large-scale, sweeping adjustments. Miller (1994) also provides a framework for the creation of multigrade classrooms, including six key points:

1. Multiage instruction clearly yields benefits for both students and teachers that justify implementation.

2. Each program must be designed with regard to the school's unique needs and characteristics.

3. Successful implementation requires strong teacher involvement as well as administrative and district support.

4. Teachers need ongoing support to make major conceptual changes required by multiage teaching.

5. Implementing a multiage program is a long-term, evolutionary process that is facilitated by a "collaborative, problem-solving orientation to change."

6. It is best to devote at least a year to preliminary steps such as creating dialogue among staff members and community, evaluating school strengths and weaknesses, and planning immediate and long-term goals.

Because of the uniqueness and the number of unknowns of this learning model, those who are directly involved will need to be supported. Administrators inside the schools where multigrade classrooms may be created must also understand the learning environment so they are able to properly support the staff that will be involved in the daily, direct involvement. If there are best practices and ideas available for implementation and scaling of multigrade classrooms, then they must be given a proper review and opportunity to find success. These sources were compiled in

an effort to analyze effective practices related to pedagogy, relationships, and the learning environment while also exploring the challenges and rewards associated with the multigrade classroom. There are many misunderstandings and unanswered questions concerning pedagogy, relationships established, and the physical environment related to multigrade classrooms and what are the best practices in establishing a multigrade classroom. The previous research was compiled in an effort to answer these questions and to discover effective ways to implement these classrooms.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Early childhood education is often the foundation for a child's formal schooling and educational experiences. The goal for starting a child on their educational journey should be to provide a positive experience both academically and socially between peers and teachers. For many school districts across the nation, Pre-K programs are the launching point for children by providing education in an environment that allows them to acclimate to an academic environment and their expectations while also providing them the opportunity to interact with a group of peers and adults outside of the ones in their home. Pre-K programs are often touted as preparation for Kindergarten. Inside a Pre-K classroom, it is likely that there will be a spectrum of student proficiencies pertaining to academics, and according to Ventura (1993), young children's learning rates are typically sporadic.

American education is in a continuous cycle of searching for ways to solve a host of issues, ranging from student achievement to a lack of certificated teachers in schools. While there is no magic wand that can be waved to solve all of the problems in the education system, there are some educational theories and ideas that already exist which can help alleviate some of these problems. Multigrade education is one such approach. This chapter will further explore the context of best practices found inside multigrade education as well as outline the research methods and theoretical underpinnings of the study.

Restatement of the Problem and Research Questions

As stated in the previous chapter, while multigrade classrooms are not a new concept in education, there are still many unknowns regarding this learning model. Some of the researchers studied in this process have been directly involved in multigrade education as a teacher (Fu, et

al., 1999; Carter, 2005). The purpose of this study is to uncover, explore, and capture the best practices within a multigrade elementary classroom. The study will explore these practices specifically related to pedagogy, relationships, and the learning environment in order to inform others about how to best actualize a multiage elementary classroom. As this study unfolds, the question that serves as the guide for this research process is: What are the best approaches for implementing effective academic instruction and building relationships inside a multigrade classroom?

The research is driven by the multigrade classroom still being shrouded in mystery and misconceptions. As previously stated, these learning environments are not new, but they are still seen as a novelty idea or created out of necessity. These research questions drill down to uncover some of the untold stories inside multigrade classrooms and will allow those who are immersed in these classrooms to provide accounts. The questions also seek to understand and explore the possibility of scaling this learning model.

Research Design

The research framework used in this study will be a qualitative instrumental case study. Although research inside of the field of education is regularly conducted, the specific aspects of multigrade education is one field of study that has not seen the amount of research seen in some other areas of education. The goal behind this research is to not only explore the best practices that may be found inside of multigrade classrooms, but to also allow those who are and have been immersed in this unique learning environment to provide first-hand accounts and experiences of their time spent inside the multigrade classroom. The research is driven by a triangulation of aspects of a multigrade classroom and how these elements interact with one another.

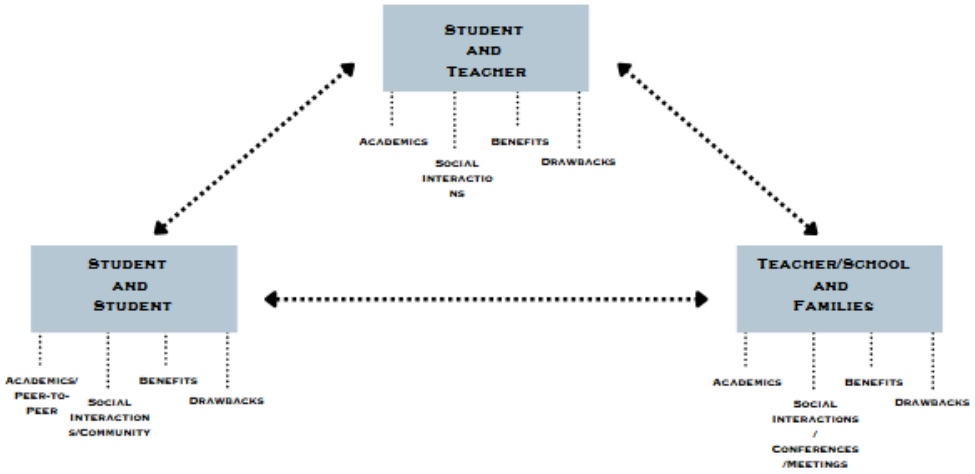

Figure 3.1

In *Explanation and Understanding* (von Wright, 1971), the author discusses how understanding is more closely tied to being intentional than explanations. Special attention will be paid to bridging what is already known into what is misunderstood or misconceived. Stake (1995) explains how case studies seek deeper, more thorough understanding of a topic. He also explains how the uniqueness and complexity of a topic can be appreciated, which will strengthen the context of the researched area. Von Wright (1971) agrees, explaining that the importance of case studies is to seek understanding of the human experience. Additionally, Yin (2018) explains how case studies aim to explore and explain an experience or phenomena in its everyday, typical setting. Stake (1995) explains that case studies highlight experiences and events that are unique while simultaneously being commonplace. He also explains how these inquiries often create additional questions and ideas that may seem unresolved as well as rarely advancing the field of study in the larger overall picture. Yin (2018) describes many of the questions that drive and

eventually evolve during a case study are either "how" or "why" questions. These questions are the driving force to allow the researcher and the subjects to explain and describe in detail their experiences and personal interpretations of these occurrences inside the researched area.

One of the main factors in deciding to pursue the case study path for this process stems from the researcher's ties to the multigrade learning environment. Researchers such as Eisner and Peshkin (1990) and Erickson (1986) advocate that qualitative research prioritizes interpretation of events versus the measuring of data. Stake (1995) contends that qualitative research also emphasizes that the person most responsible for the research process be directly tied to the field that is being investigated. Stake describes the importance of having an observer or interpreter in the field to record what is happening while also being able to substantiate the observations. A personal connection to the field allows the researcher to be a bridge of communication for those inside the field to those who are not. Terminology and incidents can be explained without concern of any details or verbiage being lost in translation.

In *The Art of Case Study Research*, Stake (1995) also dives into the importance of qualitative research and those conducting it to be able to represent what is happening during the process via direct interpretation or stories. Allowing the story to be told by teachers, administrators and even indirectly, the students via any provided artifacts allows these stories to be passed along in order to provide a clearer understanding of the multigrade environment. Aligning with these ideas, Bhattacharya (2017) explains that qualitative research seeks to work inside the contexts of experiences and to make meaning of those experiences.

Subjectivity/Positionality Statement

The purpose of choosing this study stems from the learning environment I taught in for the first eight years of my educational career. The multigrade classroom I taught in served

students from ages three to six years old. Typically, inside these classrooms, referred to as Primary classrooms, there is a certificated Early Childhood teacher, an Educational Assistant, and approximately eighteen students. The number breakdown in the student population is usually limited to a combined total of no more than thirteen preschool and Pre-K students with the number of Kindergarten students being flexible. I have had a year with ten Kindergarten students and another year with only three. In an ideal situation, the students will begin with a teacher as preschoolers and stay for three academic years until they leave Kindergarten. This extended time of instruction allowed me to have a more thorough understanding of the entire student, including their academic proficiency, their social/emotional competence, and what makes them "tick" in general. Some students I knew understand independence and I could allow them to work with minimal interruptions after they have been given instruction. Other students needed more one-on-one instruction and may be less resilient, so I had to manage how they were approached when I provided instructions on new, more complex tasks.

The relationships aspect of education is often overlooked, but it cannot be understated about the importance of building positive relationships and trust between students, their families, and the school and teachers. Inside the classroom, students of any age should feel they are taken care of and being taught by someone who cares. Hierck (2016) explains how teachers must develop a positive classroom culture in order to have an environment that supports and encourages student achievement and growth. The relationships inside my Primary classroom were not limited to the interactions between myself and my students or the Educational Assistant and the students. The students also interacted with each other regularly and it is rarely limited to students of the same grade-level interacting with each other. There is an unofficial hierarchy that developed among the students inside the classroom. The Kindergarten students are often looked

upon as the “veterans” or leaders of the classroom, especially those who were with me for all three years. They often helped remind other students of rules and expectations or showed them how to perform tasks inside the classroom. The Kindergarten students also had more standards and skills they were required to learn and were given additional resources or opportunities their younger peers did not receive. One example is they were provided with their own pencil boxes with their own supplies while the rest of the class shared cups of pencils or other supplies. Kindergarten students were also usually allowed to choose where they wanted to work first before the others. It would be reasonable to expect these allowances to cause conflict, but it is rarely an issue. The students all usually accepted the role of responsibility and order. Because of this acceptance, older students were often seen working with a younger peer on a variety of tasks inside the classroom. These tasks included providing academic lessons or helping with practical life or sensorial lessons. Watching these interactions unfold over the years helped spur this section of the research.

The social aspect of the relationships is evident by what was previously described, but the students also interact academically. There were times when there were lessons or standards only taught to Kindergarten students, but oftentimes the whole class gets involved with learning the lesson one way or another. Pre-K students wanted to learn the same task they saw their older peers working on and they were allowed to explore the skill with some guidance and instruction. When students showed capability and understanding of an academic skill, they were given instruction by either adult in the classroom without limitation of their grade level. Students were also allowed to “teach” lessons or skills to their peers provided they had shown a full competency of the given task. There is also an element of “residual learning” that occurs. This

refers to when students may not explicitly be receiving instruction, but they indirectly absorb elements of the lesson or skill by hearing it or watching it from afar.

Site

Great Horizons Elementary is a unique school that hosts classrooms with students from multiple grades learning in the same classroom. The school has twelve of these multigrade classrooms which serve students classified as preschool, Pre-K, and Kindergarten. These classrooms are identified as Primary classrooms. In the past, the school has also had multigrade classrooms with first- and second-grade students together as well as one school year with two classrooms with 20 students each from first- to fourth grade together. Great Horizons Elementary is a public Montessori school in a major city in the southeast United States.

The past school year brought some challenges for Great Horizon with staffing issues and student enrollment. While twelve of the classrooms are designated for Primary, there were two classrooms with an Educational Assistant only and no certificated teacher for the entire school year. To comply with teacher-to-student ratio requirements, one of those classrooms had ten students and the other had seven, none of these students being Kindergarteners. There were also two additional classrooms where the certificated teacher did not finish the school year. The student total population is approximately 340 students with approximately 173 students being Primary students. The breakdown of Primary students is 58 preschool, 73 Pre-K, and 42 Kindergarten. Following the 2023-2024 school year, many teachers transferred from the school.

Proposed Timeline

The following timeline outlines the proposed phases of this study, from initial preparation through data collection, analysis, and final writing.

Table 1

Steps	**Timeline**
Participant Selection	February 2025
Data Collection/Interviews	March 2025
Interview Transcriptions	March/April 2025
Data Analysis	April/May 2025

Participant Selection

Aligning with the philosophy of a case study, the participants in this research will include educators with direct experience inside multigrade classrooms. The chosen educators must have served inside a multigrade classroom for at least three academic years in order to have experienced the ideal situation of having students for the entirety of the learning cycle. Stake (1995) explains that opportunity to learn is the priority when selecting specific participants and locations versus a variety of participants. The proposed site currently has four teachers who have worked in the school for at least six academic years. This is important for this research because those teachers will have had students who have stayed with them from preschool until Kindergarten. Additionally, there are three other teachers who are not at the school this year but taught the same grade level(s) for more than eight school years. Along with these educators, there are Educational Assistants which serve inside these classrooms. There are four EAs who have served inside their current classrooms over the same period of time with the groups of students who are candidates to be interviewed for this process. There is also a current first-grade

teacher who is a potential candidate. This teacher spent nearly twenty years teaching Primary and took her Kindergarten students with her to first grade when she made the transition.

Data Collection

To collect data for this research, the researcher will conduct field interviews with educators who have worked inside multigrade classrooms to collect information on the instructional methods as well as the interactions between peers and teacher-to-student.

Interviews

Stake (1995) explains that surveys are typically less effective or necessary in qualitative studies due to the individual and unique experiences of the participants. He also explains how the research questions in case studies are typically oriented toward specific phenomena or experiences. Thus, the majority of the interview questions will be designed as open-ended questions and delivered in a semi-structured format. As explained by Bhattacharya (2017), this requires the interviewer to prepare questions that have further probing questions attached to them. A protocol is in place prior to the interview, but there is expectation and acknowledgment that the questions may lead to a range of possible answers and outcomes. Teacher insight of occurrences as the school year progresses inside the classrooms will provide opportunities to gather and create additional questions for follow-up interviews with the educators. While the bulk of the interviews with teachers will be conducted in a formal semi-structured process, Merriam & Tisdell (2016) also recommend having sections of the interview process that are structured and uniform in order to collect the same demographic data.

Research questions will need to be planned accordingly. Some questions may be identical, and some questions may align with each other according to the timeframe. Some of these interview questions may change based on what is provided by the teachers' explanations of

the classroom interactions. Bhattacharya (2017) provides a list of interview question types and examples. Table 2 provides some potential interview questions and their type:

Table 2

Question	Question Type
What is a typical day like inside a multigrade classroom?	Descriptive
How did/do you choose your classroom layout?	Mini Tour
What social interactions did/do you see between your students? Did/do they intermix between grade levels?	Structural
Can you provide an example of when having a student for multiple years did not show the anticipated growth? What about an example where you saw a student grow beyond expectations?	Example

In order to respect the participants' time and efforts, a schedule of potential times for interviews will be provided and the participants will have a say on what days and times work best for them. Interviews will be recorded and dictated through a resource such as otter.ai. The recordings will be stored on a password protected computer.

Data Analysis Procedures

Researchers in the field of qualitative studies describe data analysis in case studies as inductive (Bhattacharya, Merriam and Tisdell). Stake says there is no specific moment when

analysis begins. Merriam and Tisdell provide a “logic of data analysis” (p. 211) chart that describes the flow during this section of the research process.

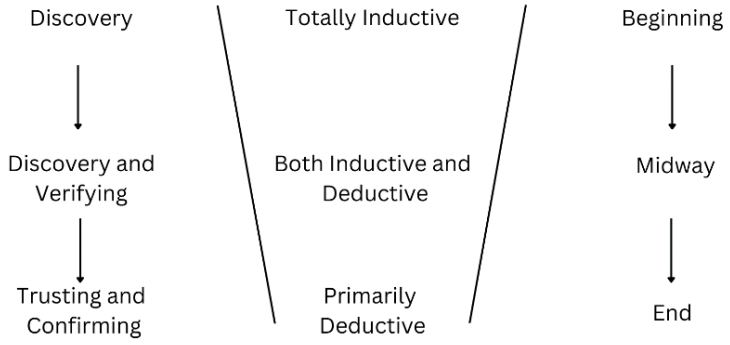

Figure 3.2

Researchers also agree that case study data analysis provides opportunities for discovering themes and commonalities, coding, and categorization of data. Through these categories, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) emphasize that they must be “responsive to the purpose of the research.”

Coding is a key data analysis component for case studies. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) recommend notating each interview, such as the interviewee and date, to make the analysis process smoother. To assist with coding, transcriptions of the interviews can be loaded into word cloud websites to find reoccurring words or phrases in order to build themes. Listening back to

interviews and analyzing responses also provides an opportunity to create follow-up questions for later interviews. Interviews with different teachers may reveal similarities that can be designated as potential themes. Additionally, interviews from the same teacher at different points in the data collection process may also show consistent ideas and themes. As the data analysis process unfolds, some of these themes may either yield additional sub-themes or some themes may not yield enough data to be relevant.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

I will maintain trustworthiness by adopting well established research methods. I will begin the study by participating in bracketing (Creswell, 2016). Bracketing is a procedure in which the researcher sets aside their own experiences as much as possible to try and see the experience anew (Creswell, 2016). I will do this by writing analytical memos to record my thinking. As the researcher, I will have a Reflective Journal to monitor the progress of the study, have running notes, write thoughts, impressions, patterns, track effectiveness of techniques, write any emerging theories, record any biases or contradicting information I come across in the work, and to keep a record of reflections and will continue writing Analytical Memos as I engage in data coding and data analysis (Saldana, 2013; Shenton, 2004). Setting aside my experiences for a fresh approach, suspending my own understandings, and cultivating my own curiosity contributes to trustworthiness because of an effort for a neutral approach to what the data says.

I will also maintain credibility by using tactics for honesty. These will include giving mentor participants multiple opportunities to refuse to participate (initial email soliciting interest, a follow up email inviting participants to a meeting to understand the study, and another opportunity when discussing and signing the study consent form). Mentee placement will occur after agreeing to participate in the study. Honesty will further be expressed through encouraging

participants to be frank in all sessions and during interviews (Shenton, 2004). I will utilize the familiarity of the culture in which the study will take place. I am currently working within the culture in which the study will take place and will have established relationships with those participants of the study to ensure authenticity (Shenton, 2004). I will maintain credibility by using triangulated data from multiple data sources, as well as, different methods to compensate for their individual limitations (reflection journals, field notes, and debriefings, document artifacts, audio recordings of mentor study group sessions, audio recordings of one-on-one interviews, audio recordings of focus group interview, audio recordings from mentor/mentee sessions) (Shenton, 2004; Yin, 2013). I will maintain credibility by engaging in frequent debriefing sessions with my committee chair to support collaboration of ideas, alternative approaches, developing interpretations, probing to recognize my own biases and preferences, and to support in course of action (Saldana, 2013; Shenton, 2004). I will have peers give feedback in presentations, sessions, interview questions, mock interviews, during debriefs, and will welcome any feedback from the dissertation committee. Lastly, I will have members check the accuracy of the data collected during checkpoints in the duration of the study, especially that the words captured in the audio recordings match what they actually intended (Saldana, 2013; Shenton, 2004). Taken together, these actions will ensure credibility by openness, by willingness to realign for rigorous research and keeping honest throughout the process.

I will be descriptive and specific with the context and participants, so this affords the reader to make decisions for transferability of the study and of the study findings (Shenton, 2004). I will also collaborate with my committee chair to consider multiple interpretations of the data and consider the data questions, even after coding, as a way to falsify/complicate/problematize my interpretation of the data (Bhattacharya, 2017). This will

ensure I have addressed multiple perspectives and interpretations of the data (Bhattacharya, 2017). These steps ensure credibility by offering the data in full.

Other considerations are I will also maintain trustworthiness by my subjectivity statement and transparency. I will maintain respect and minimize my influence on the mentor/mentee relationship by not being present for their educative mentoring meetings and will ask for audio recording to be as minimally invasive as possible. I will ask many open-ended questions in my one-on-one semi-structured interviews with the mentees. I will also ask many open-ended questions in my semi-structured interview focus group with the mentees. The focus group setting will keep the mentor study group relationships intact and will minimize my influence in the interviewing process. These actions will support transparency by lowering the risk of my influence and supports proper interpretation and dissemination of results by others.

Summary

This research aims to allow the multigrade classroom and all of its uniqueness to be revealed. Investigating the multigrade environment via teacher interviews and allowing their expertise to shine will be important. Allowing teachers to tell their stories, including the positives and negatives they have experienced with this learning model, will provide first-hand glimpses into the multi-layered interactions that happen amongst the educators and students. As recommended by Bhattacharya, allowing the data in the form of teacher interviews to speak for itself will be insightful. How all of those relationships along with academics and the physical environment unfold for the students, regardless of age or assigned grade-level, can not only help demystify the multigrade classroom, but also possibly provide a guide for expansion of this type of education.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

The purpose of this research is to explore the multigrade classroom of today by allowing professionals who have first-hand knowledge and experience with this learning model to provide insight into this field. Interviews were conducted with the research question, "What are the best approaches for implementing effective academic instruction and building relationships inside a multigrade classroom?" being used as the guide. Educators who had spent at least three academic years inside multigrade classrooms were interviewed about their experiences and knowledge regarding the multi-layered academics, relationships, physical environment, and challenges of this type of classroom. These professionals provided personal accounts of how this learning environment can be beneficial while also challenging. Their interviews served as the sole data collection strategy for this case study. After both interviews were completed, the researcher compared them to find similarities, and common themes and ideas from their answers. The researcher focused the comparison and collection based on the purpose of finding effective approaches for academics and relationship-building while operating in the unique learning environment that is the multigrade classroom.

Data Collection Overview

The collection of data for this research involved interviewing professionals who have experience teaching in a multigrade classroom. The criteria for selecting the participants required them to have taught inside a multigrade classroom for at least three academic years. This time frame means that the participant has experienced the ideal situation of having students for the entirety of the learning cycle. To obtain permission, principals at select schools were asked for permission to interview teachers who met these requirements. As participants agreed to be

interviewed, they were informed of what the goal of this study was and asked to provide their experiences. Both participants agreed to be interviewed virtually via Microsoft Teams. This format allowed the interview to be recorded and transcribed. The video recordings allowed the researcher to make sure certain portions of the interviews were correctly transcribed.

Interviews were semi-formal while also having sections of the interview process that are structured and uniform in order to collect the same demographic data. Below are their recommendations and guides for a semi-structured interview (p. 110).

- Interview guide includes a mix of more and less structured interview questions.
- All questions used flexibly.
- Usually specific data required from all respondents.
- Largest part of interview guided by list of questions or issues to be explored.
- No predetermined wording or order.

Certain parts of the interviews saw participants asked the same questions to obtain comparative data. Using open-ended questions allowed the interviewees to reflect and respond. The questions were kept short and conversational in order to allow the interviewee the opportunity to reflect and answer without being confused or overwhelmed. Certain questions led the interviewees to answers that occasionally covered multiple questions while also occasionally leading to questions that were not previously planned. The researcher maintained being an active listener as the questions are being answered and stayed prepared to pivot to additional questions if necessary. Being mindful that these teachers were no longer inside the multigrade classrooms, the researcher spoke with the interviewees the day of the scheduled times and prepared them by informing them of the open-ended question format and explaining that they could take as much time as needed to process and reflect on the questions before answering. They were informed

that the focus of the research was to gain insight into the multigrade classroom, specifically around the academics and the multi-layered relationships that develop.

Throughout the interviews, the researcher had the list of questions available and noted which questions had not been asked while also noting which responses from the participants covered multiple questions. The researcher also was prepared to ask follow-up questions to responses that may have not been originally planned. While the research question serves as the guide for the research and interviews, key aspects of the research helped form some specific questions. These aspects were academics and relationships, with the relationships focusing on student-to-student, teacher-to-student, and teacher-to-family. With these aspects in mind, the interviewees' responses began to show themes that followed with these aspects.

This chapter presents findings from the two semi-structured interviews conducted with early childhood educators who met the criteria of having taught in a multigrade classroom for at least three years. Teacher identities are kept anonymous by referring to them under pseudonyms. The interview process and analysis revealed key insights into teaching in a multigrade setting. This process also uncovered commonalities and patterns as well as varying experiences regarding academics and multi-layered relationships. While these two aspects were the main focus, both participants also provided experiences from their time inside a multigrade classroom to help define what this learning model truly consists of. The following sections detail the emergent themes.

Participant Profiles

To find similarities in the two separate interviews, some of the interview questions were identical while some were specific to the response provided by the interviewees. The researcher began both interviews with the same opening questions:

1. How long have you been in education?
2. How many of those years have been spent in a multigrade classroom?
3. What grades have you taught through your educational career?

These three questions provided individualized responses that gave specific information about each teacher.

Table 3

Penelope	Arianna
• Seventeen years • Ten teaching multigrade (Nine in Primary, one in 1st/2nd) • Currently teaching Pre-K solely • Youngest child attended Great Horizons	• Seven years • Six teaching multigrade • Currently teaching Pre-K solely • Youngest child attended Great Horizons

Penelope stated that she has been an educator for seventeen total years in both Florida and Tennessee. Before becoming a teacher, she said she worked several years in daycares. Of those seventeen years as a teacher, ten of those years were spent in a multigrade classroom at Great Horizons. Her first year at Great Horizons, she taught first- and second-grade combined, and the other nine years were spent in Primary. She is currently teaching solely Pre-K at a different school in the same district.

Arianna just completed her seventh year as an educator. Her first six years in education were spent inside a Primary multigrade classroom at Great Horizons. Before teaching she spent "a few years working with children, not school, but still childcare." She is currently teaching solely Pre-K at a different school in the same district.

An unintended commonality and important aspect that emerged later in the interviews were that both Penelope and Arianna chose for their son and daughter, respectively, to attend a multigrade classroom beginning as three-year-olds. Their children were actually in the same classroom as preschoolers, and both tested well enough to jump into Kindergarten the following year. Penelope has an older daughter who originally planned to start at Great Horizons as a Pre-K student, but the Covid-19 pandemic caused her to change her mind. Her oldest daughter eventually enrolled as a first-grader and stayed until she completed third grade. Arianna also has a teenage daughter who attended Great Horizons throughout her elementary years.

Findings and Analysis

The following sections further explain and analyze the interviews with Penelope and Arianna. Throughout their separate interviews, themes and commonalities emerged.

Figure 4.1

Some of these themes, academics and relationships, directly align with the original focuses. One original theme of misconceptions and misunderstandings is still discussed, although it morphs in the educators' definitions and explanations of the classrooms.

For context, throughout the interviews, both educators discuss their times in the multigrade classroom by explaining the Montessori environment. Their former school, Great Horizons, was a public Montessori school. There are also references to "primary", which was the designation of their classrooms at Great Horizons. Primary classrooms served students from preschool, typically beginning at three-years old, to Kindergarten.

Defining and Explaining the Learning Model

One of the additional guiding points during the research process was to allow those who have worked inside a multigrade classroom to provide their insights and experiences in order to give a better understanding of what it truly entails. There are many misunderstandings and misconceptions that come with this learning model truly involves. The next question asked to both educators allowed for their personal insights and experiences into being an educator inside a

multigrade classroom to be explained in-depth. Both were asked, “How would you best define what a multigrade classroom is?”, which led to both providing thoughts about this learning model and experiences with explaining the classroom to others. Both educators reported that informing others they taught in a multigrade classroom was met with surprise and curiosity. Arianna explained that oftentimes even the parents of her students were not fully aware of the education model.

> Most of our parents… they didn't know what Montessori was until they came in, you know, and actually saw it for themselves. But I think most of the three- and four-year-olds’ (parents) thought it was more like a daycare setting where they are just pretty much coloring and all of that. But once they come in and see that they're working with the older kids, too, and learning at the same level as the older kids and it's not just all fun. They're still learning while they're having fun as well.

Penelope echoed this sentiment, describing a general misunderstanding about what multigrade education entails while also giving personal insight into what the multigrade classroom and its students' abilities may typically look like. The most frequent questions Penelope said she would be asked revolved around the difficulty of managing the age range and abilities of her students.

> The first thing I usually hear is, “What do you mean by that? How do you get that done? How is the classroom running, especially with primary knowing those preschoolers and Pre-Ks in there?” they say. They think you’re being a daycare and a teacher at the same time to the Kindergarteners. No, this is not daycare. I am not here pretending these preschoolers and Pre-K are just here for somebody to watch them. No, they are part of our classroom. They are learning, they are socializing, they are doing everything they need to do, just like the Kindergartners are here, doing everything they need to do.

Interestingly, both participants frequently encountered misconceptions that their classrooms resembled daycare centers or unstructured learning environments, especially by parents of their students. However, after visiting the classrooms, both participants noted that parents were surprised to see rigorous academic work and student collaboration.

Academics

With the primary objective of schools being to provide students with a high-quality education, academics inside the multigrade classroom was one of the main focuses during the research process and the interview procedure. The researcher was aware of the unique learning model and aimed to provide the interviewees with opportunities to provide their firsthand experiences with the benefits and disadvantages of this style of education. One unintended advantage that surfaced was the teachers explaining the ability to tailor instruction to individual student needs. Both educators highlighted the benefit of the multigrade structure allowing and encouraging instruction based on student ability versus student grade level. Instructional grouping allowed children to engage in peer learning, with younger students benefiting from the modeling behavior of older peers. Arianna emphasized that students could learn at their own pace and did not need to be rushed. Penelope similarly described how this model promoted academic and social development across all ages.

Arianna provided examples of how 3-year-olds learned routines and expectations from older students, who often served as informal mentors. She explained how the classroom allowed students to learn based on what they needed versus grade- or age-specific academic standards. The students were also able to learn via interaction with their peers instead of solely relying on the teacher to provide instruction.

> The kids were able to learn on their own level. We didn't have to move to push them too fast. We could work with each kid on that level and then group them and work with them that way. And the younger ones were learning from the older ones as well, since they were all in it together. The three- and four-year-olds were able to see what the Kindergarteners were doing, so they caught on pretty quickly if some of them wasn't already on that same level as them.

This answer led to the researcher asking if these interactions were limited only to academics. She explained how the students who had been with her in previous academic years also helped with modeling and setting the expectations and routines in the classroom. Penelope provided similar insight into how the grouping of students was based off academic ability instead of grade level. She explained how beneficial the multigrade classroom structure was for differentiating the learning tasks for students.

> It helped a lot knowing that, yes, we have all these age groups. However, when I group the children, when I am giving the lesson, I know that these students as a group are ready for these types of standards. So yes, that preschooler could join the lessons that student is ready for with the Kindergarteners. So, I can still do it in a group. (I can) teach a group with that preschooler and that Kindergarten, knowing that they both are ready for the same thing. The Kindergartner, who is not ready, can still get those foundational skills that they missed with preschoolers and Pre-K, who are in that (same) level. So, they are still able to learn on their ability level. It does not matter how old they are, I'm following the child where they are. If the child is ready for this standard, then we want to make sure that the child is getting what they need.

Penelope was asked if the classroom's learning model was especially beneficial for younger students to be able to learn alongside peers based on their proficiency level versus their assigned grade, and she responded, "That is correct. So, none of the children are losing out there. All are winning technically because they're all going to show growth based on where they are." She emphasized the benefit of the younger students being able to learn from their peers versus only following what the teachers were asking them to do.

> At first, those walking into our classroom many times did not believe that we had more than one age group sitting in the same classroom. So, with the multi-age, it's preschool Pre-K and Kindergarten. Since it is the primary age group, to me, what that means is a lot of the kids are coming in with different learning abilities, so it is either they're coming as a clean slate where they don't know as much or they're coming in knowing a lot. Depending on what they already knew coming into the school building, we might have Kindergarteners who are entering for the first time as five-year-olds who have never been in school or have not been at home learning anything academically. While we have some who come in as Kindergarteners knowing so much, but it goes the same way with our

> Pre-K and preschoolers. They can come in knowing as much as a Kindergarten student or there might be some who are ready to start Kindergarten standards.

Penelope was asked about the growth that students typically showed in her classrooms. She was asked to explain the growth she saw in her younger students who got the opportunity to work at higher-level standards. The researcher also asked her to detail the growth she saw in Kindergarten students who may have started the year academically behind their peers. She again highlighted the importance of the multigrade, Montessori curriculum and its focus on what the individual students need versus traditional schools' emphasis on being "sticklers on following the pacing guide" and "being told that all students should be able to do the same thing." When asked to further explain the differences in the two learning models, she explained:

> Well, what we did is follow the standards. So, we're still following the same standards, but what happened is that we were not pushing through a guide pacing guide. So, we're able to target the areas where the children need the most help. We move from there, but still in our mind, we're still remembering where they have to end. So yes, that pacing guide, what the child has to know by the end of Kindergarten, is still our goal. However, we are going back and targeting what the child needs and building upon that. So, when we do, we do see much more growth by the time that child in the year instead of OK well the pain set to go. But this child is not ready to move on and I'm going to move.

Arianna provided a similar explanation of not only how much her students grew, but how easy it was for her to build upon standards or skills her students had learned the previous school year because of the continuation. "We know them well by the second (school) year. We know who they are and what they know," she explained. Later in the interview she detailed how students who returned to her classroom at the beginning of a new academic year were able to adjust to being back in school fairly quickly. She emphasized that routines were easy to re-establish, and the beginning of the school year allowed for reviewing expectations with the majority of her students instead of needing to provide a whole new classroom of students with

rules, routines, and expectations that were new to them. She stated, “We review it with the kids that have been there, and then the older ones who have been there can help the newer ones as well.”

While both educators celebrated the benefits of long-term, individualized instruction, Penelope acknowledged that not all students progress at the expected pace, even in a stable multigrade setting. She noted that while such instances are rare—perhaps one student every couple of years—they do occur. In these cases, observation, documentation, and strategy modification are essential first steps. Despite the close teacher-student relationship, some children require additional support that may lie beyond the classroom. Penelope emphasized the importance of family collaboration. She also highlighted that progression is not guaranteed simply by continuity, reinforcing the need for ongoing evaluation and personalized instruction. When asked about times she may have not seen the desired growth from her students, Penelope discussed how having students in the classroom from a younger age also allowed potential learning issues to be spotted early on. “During the observation in the beginning and working with the child, you do realize at an early age where the child is. Sometimes, okay, socially, and emotionally, this child is not ready for me to give them (a certain) lesson.,” she stated. Penelope acknowledged that she had to be mindful about the appropriate developmental expectations for the students, especially the youngest ones. She further explained:

> We are still meeting (the students) with their needs, but what about that student who enters and then we start realizing, oh, there might be dyslexia here. There might be other potential learning concerns. Did we catch it at an early age? Okay, now let's get you the extra help needed while you are here. So that way we're not waiting for Kindergarten or in a traditional school it will be after you enter Kindergarten and after so much time has passed. So, by the time that child gets that help, it is now towards the end of the year. But with finding it early, catching it early, boom. let's get you the help now. So even if you start getting help at the end of preschool, guess what? You already started getting the help earlier than a Kindergarten student.

Arianna discussed the growth she typically saw in her students and if she saw any downsides to the learning model. She said she did not remember any specific instances where students may have not grown to the potential she hoped for. “I can only assume that the growth was faster for my kids because I was able to work with them on their level. I didn’t have to rush them through their lessons…I didn’t have to rush them on anything.”

Penelope emphasized that teacher autonomy was enhanced in the multigrade Montessori setting, allowing for more consistent routines and instructional strategies. She believes that rather than resetting every year, the educators built upon existing relationships and classroom norms, which increased instructional time and deepened learning for her students. She shared how the depth of familiarity with each student allowed for more efficient instructional planning. Rather than writing general lesson plans for an entire class, she adjusted individual student work plans in real time, informed by daily observations. "You write the plan as you go with that child," she said. She feels this responsive approach enhanced differentiation and reduced time spent on unnecessary planning tasks by allowing her to focus on giving students what they specifically needed to learn.

As previously stated, both Penelope and Arianna chose to have their children attend a multigrade classroom at Great Horizons. Both were asked about what led to them making the decision to place their children in the school. Penelope responded:

> As a parent and as a teacher, I try my best to give my children, you know what they need first before starting school. Again, that's the level that we're saying coming with different children coming in different areas but again knowing that I had taught my child so much. Yes, I wanted him to go to school for the social, emotional part and get to make friends and listen to teachers and do all this. But also, I wanted him to also work on his level academically… So, then it would be yes, while you’re having fun, while you’re making friends, while you’re doing this, you are also learning.

Arianna shared a similar sentiment regarding her youngest child being enrolled in a multigrade classroom. She was asked for her thoughts on how much her daughter grew and benefited from her time spent at Great Horizons:

> Yes, because they work with the kids on their level versus them just being in Pre-K where you have to do, you have to stick to what Pre-K says because it's just pushing on the pacing guide. So, with her being in multi-age (classroom) and with them having the Kindergarteners in there, you know, she came in preschool. So, she was able to see the older students doing lessons and skills that she could try. She started learning things that I thought she may know, but she really picked things up quickly. Her teacher knew I didn't want her to do simple lessons all day, so she showed her some Kindergarten math. She helped her start reading early. It really helped her, I think.

Relationships

Throughout the separate interviews, the topic of relationships between teachers, students, and families was brought up both formally and informally. There were planned questions involving relationships and there were times that the interviewees' responses led to additional probing questions regarding the multi-tiered relationships that can be found inside a classroom. Both teachers stressed the importance of the extended relationships fostered in multigrade settings. While prolonged time in the same classroom sometimes led to peers having issues with one another, or occasionally with the teacher, it also allowed for deeper understanding, stronger friendships, and continuity in teaching strategies. The extended relationship allowed educators to tailor how they interacted with individual students and their families, which helped to build authentic partnerships. The relationships in the classroom often extended outside of the classroom as well with students' social interactions.

Having students for more than one year enabled educators to build on prior knowledge of each child's learning style and emotional needs. As previously mentioned, Arianna noted that this familiarity reduced the anxiety and learning curves typically experienced during the start of the

school year, including for herself. Students returned to classrooms where they already felt known, supported, and safe. Arianna spoke to the benefit of students returning to her classroom at the beginning of the year. She highlighted the benefit that families experienced from not having to send their children to an unfamiliar environment.

> At the beginning of the year, especially with the three-year olds, most of them don't know you and are not ready to leave them. But they have to because of jobs and all of that. But then seeing that they're coming back to the same teacher, the same friends the next year, with people that they became closer with and it's not them starting over. Even though you have the new ones coming in. But it's people that they've known.

She also shared that this continuity made the beginning-of-year transition smoother for both students and teachers, cutting down some classroom management issues that typically come with an entirely new class. With the educators both spending the past school year teaching solely Pre-K, they were asked about the difference in starting the year in a new school versus years past. Arianna replied, "This year was kind of scary because it was my first year in Pre-K only and then it was all new students. It was just something different from what I was used to." Penelope, who also moved to a new school and classroom with solely Pre-K students, said that there was, "a big difference. It felt odd not seeing any students walk in that I already knew."

Penelope provided an in-depth perspective about how her multigrade environment was designed to help build community among the teachers and students.

> The way the Montessori classroom is put together, also is in the Montessori philosophy of respecting, respecting the classroom, respecting each other, and respecting our environment. So, the minute the child comes, he comes into the class. You have to, first, have it prepared and ready. It must be prepared and ready for them. What you expect them to get out of it, you already put in their environment. I want it to be tidy. I want it to be clean. I want it to be in order. I'm going to already do that before they enter the classroom. So that way I can teach them how to do the same thing. How to respect our environment, how to use what we have in our classroom, how to take care of the things we have in our classroom, and how to move about in our classroom again, that's before they enter. We have to have it ready. The second thing is respecting each other now that

> we're here. We're learning how to show respect to our environment, how to take care of our environment, how to use the things in our environment.

Both interviewees provided some insight into the benefit of continuity between the teachers and students over multiple school years. In addition to alleviating some of the beginning of the year uncertainties, she also explained how the younger students would gravitate toward their older peers. She stated that she often leaned on her returning Kindergarteners, especially those who began with her as three-year olds and had spent the previous two school years with her, to help set routines and expectations of the classroom. Penelope provided insight into how the continuity helped with some of the beginning of the year concerns not just for her, but for the majority of her returning families. She explained,

> "The parents…of course they missed us by the time they come back (from summer break). The parents say, 'Oh my goodness, they miss you. They love you guys so much,' you know? So, the comfort… they do feel comfortable with us. They know we really do love and care for their kids."

Both participants were asked about student interactions in regard to friendships and Penelope added that the long-term classroom structure not only helped students build friendships but also created opportunities for families to form strong connections with one another. She observed that classroom birthdays, playdates, and shared weekend outings often began with a single event—like a birthday invitation—and grew into lasting friendships among both students and parents. With multiple years spent together in the same classroom, these relationships extended over prolonged periods of time. These relationships also extended to the families outside of the classroom. Arianna explained that seeing the parents for multiple years often led to her being invited to birthday parties, sports activities, or other social events. Penelope provided similar examples, stating that students "become close friends and then over the years, especially

being in the classroom for several years, the families become very close knit with each other." She spoke about how often students would say that they saw their classmates outside of school at the park or other places. She also added that oftentimes her students' first friends were their classmates and how the students began to interact as though they were an extended family.

Both educators emphasized that this trust extended beyond the classroom walls and throughout the community. Families frequently requested specific teachers based on prior experiences, and word-of-mouth referrals brought siblings, other family members and neighbors into the classroom. This cyclical pattern further reinforced the community-oriented nature of the learning environment, with teachers not only guiding children but also witnessing entire families grow over time. Penelope further emphasized the unique bond that forms as students begin to see their teacher as a trusted, familial figure. "They love you and they're comfortable with you," she explained, adding that this dynamic, while beneficial, requires careful navigation. Teachers must balance closeness with authority, reminding students of classroom expectations. She provided examples of how the trust factor between her and the students' families would lead to having younger siblings or other family members being placed in her classroom.

> We get to know their kids and sometimes we get to know their story, we get to know the family. We will notice sometime if that child has a sibling or little cousin or someone else in the family, year after year, they enter our classroom. They request to be in your classroom over and over and over again. So yes, they build that trust in us and that respect and knowing that, yes, we are here, and we are doing our best by their children.

She was then asked how typical it was to have younger siblings or family members being placed in her classroom. She responded:

> That was very typical for families with multiple children, very typical to see their siblings in the classroom. Sometimes I watched the parent expecting, and then a few years later to watch that baby, then walk into your class years later. So, it becomes, again, some families start feeling like family to you because now you're watching them through

> different stages. You're watching the kids go through different stages. It's a beautiful thing. It's a beautiful thing. So, yes, they start to come to you, 'Oh, I can't wait till they come in your classroom' or they'll tell their neighbors or somebody else and somebody else about your classroom. And before you know it, 'Oh yeah, I was referred to you, referred to this school because of this person and this person and this person.' So, it was very typical to watch that happen.

Arianna also described how common it was for multiple family members to pass through her classroom over multiple years. She reflected on one particular family whose son and daughter came through her room a couple of years apart.

> I remember having (name redacted) in my room a few years ago and when his mom would bring him to the classroom, she would bring the little girl with her. I let her come into the class sometimes to walk around and pick up some learning things with the students. When the brother went to first grade, his sister started in my room. That was cool because she had some familiarity with the classroom already and the parents knew me well enough to know she'd be taken care of.

She also explained how having the little sister meant she had interacted with that family for five straight years. An extended relationship with families can have benefits that extend into collaborating on their student's educational journey.

Penelope also explained how the trust factor and familiarity with students and their families could help when bringing up tough subjects such as possible learning concerns or potential disabilities. As this familiarity deepened, parents were often more receptive to difficult conversations about their child's development. Penelope noted that trust built over years of collaboration helped soften the impact of concerns around potential learning delays or behavioral challenges. Families felt more confident receiving such feedback from teachers who had known their children for multiple years, rather than a new educator encountering them for the first time. As parents observed the academic structure, emotional support, and individualized attention their children received, confidence in the program grew. Even in cases where children were not

making ideal progress, parents generally preferred to keep their children in the same classroom due to personalized care and consistent communication. She explained that not only did the families find it to be a trustworthy conversation coming from her, but other educational professionals, such as school psychologists or counselors, knew that she had enough experience with a student to make an informed decision on seeking additional support.

Regarding their own children attending Great Horizons, both teachers highlighted the importance of their child being able to interact with other kids while also getting the chance to learn in an environment that their child could benefit from. Penelope mentioned that while she had already known her son's teacher for many years since they were educators at the same school, she was appreciative of the chances he got in her room and how her son loved the school because of his classmates and his teacher. She stated, "It's awesome because during the summertime, like I said, they (the students) leave and they miss you or miss their teacher. (My son) would say, 'Can we go back to school now?' You don't have that in other schools, unless that teacher somehow got moved up with the kids." Arianna stated she felt the biggest benefit for her youngest daughter was the social aspect. "She got to be around other kids, and she enjoyed going to school. We still talk to several of her first classmates, go to parties and things. That was cool for her to have.," she explained.

While the multigrade model supports strong peer relationships, Penelope acknowledged that educators must remain flexible and responsive to challenging situations. She mentioned that while rare, there were situations in which two students simply did not get along after extended time together. In one instance, she described a pair of students whose ongoing conflicts could not be resolved even with mediation and intervention.

> They became kind of like oil and water. I would explain to them that this is the expectation of the school. This is the expectation in our classroom. This is what happens, and this is the steps we take. So, then we will have to go through those steps to try to make sure that did not continue. We put all the support systems in place for the parents to clearly understand. I didn't have to continue with those children because they did go to first grade the next year, but one thing we did mention with the school support was that those two children should not end up in the same class the next school year. We already see that those children butt heads (with each other). Therefore, the best thing for those kids will be to not put them back together.

Penelope and Arianna were asked if they could provide any potential disadvantages to the extended learning time frame for students with the teachers. Both interviewees mentioned that there were times when they felt the students became too comfortable with them and did not see them as teachers, but as members of their own family. The extended time with the students also conjured emotions when it was time for students to transition to a new grade level and classroom. Penelope described how that comfort level produced mixed feelings of pride and sadness, similar to a parent watching a child leave the home.

> Sometimes you have to remind them I am (the teacher) right now. You know, they love you and they are comfortable with you. But then they get silly, and they want to play around because now they see you as family. So, I will see that as a positive and a drawback at the same time. I had one student where it became more, very much like family. You know, as a parent you're ready to see them fly out of the nest (when they go to first grade). You still go check up on those kids. You miss them, just like family after having them for three years. By the end, you are ready to see them fly out of the nest and go to big or better things.

Penelope and Arianna were asked to compare the relationships from their multigrade classrooms to their current Pre-K only classrooms. Arianna observed that connections were made, but did not seem as strong as her time spent in the multigrade classroom. She noted that the opportunity to build stronger relationships was especially noticeable when it came to connecting with the families. Explaining the year where she teaches solely Pre-K, she stated, "We see the families for arrival and dismissal, but that's pretty much it." She explained that her

time at Great Horizons gave her the opportunity to see parents more often since the Kindergarten students had more activities in the school that parents were able to attend. Penelope mentioned that in her Pre-K classroom she talked to parents for the necessary purposes, such as arrival, dismissal, and conferences. She also stated she did not feel as connected with the parents. "Maybe because it's my first year here (at the current school) that I don't have that background with them. But really, I probably won't see any of those moms and dads next year either since my kids are going to a new classroom," she explained.

Looking Across the Data

After the data was collected and the transcriptions were compared to transcripts for accuracy, the researcher began to search for the sections where each participant highlighted the two main focuses of the process: academics, and relationships. This follows Merriam and Tisdell's recommendation that the categories or focuses should be manageable in order to effectively communicate the findings to others (2016).

Table 4

Category	Code	Illustrative Excerpt
Academics	Differentiation	"I'm following the child,"
	Not Grade-Specific	"(I can) teach a group with that preschooler and that Kindergarten, knowing that they both are ready for the same thing."
	Continuity/Familiarity	"We know them well by the second (school) year. We

		know who they are and what they know.”
	Peer-to-Peer Learning	“The three- and four-year-olds were able to see what the Kindergarteners were doing, so they caught on pretty quickly if some of them wasn't already on that same level as them.”
	Structured	“It (the classroom) must be prepared and ready for them. What you expect them to get out of it, you already put in their environment.”

Table 5

Category	Code	Illustrative Excerpt
Relationships	Student-to-student	“Oftentimes their first friends are their classmates. They begin to interact as though they were an extended family.”
	Teacher-to-student	“You miss them, just like family after having them for three years. By the end, you are ready to see them fly out of the nest and go to big or better things.”
	Teacher-to-family	“The parents say, ‘Oh my goodness, they miss you. They love you guys so much.’ They know we really do love and care for their kids.”
	Expectations and Routines	“We review (expectations) with the kids that have been there, and then the older ones who have been there can help the newer ones as well.”

Also included in their book is a step-by-step process for analysis of collected data: category construction, naming the categories, determining the number of categories, and becoming theoretical. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) also explain the importance of comparing pieces of information with each other to look for recurrences. This strategy aligns with Bhattacharya's ideas of breaking the data into manageable sections via coding, then using these data points to build commonalities or themes (2017). This strategy was used on multiple occasions to highlight potential best practices regarding academics and relationship building and maintenance inside multigrade classrooms. While one of the original focuses in the research process was the physical learning environment, the researcher noticed that while important, it did not arise as often as the academic and relationship aspects.

Summary

During the interview process, both participants answered the questions openly and honestly. Each participant's insight and experiences were transparent during the study, which allowed for the authentic context of two stories from multigrade classrooms to be told. Both educators' experiences over their sixteen combined years of educating students inside a multigrade classroom were also compared to their experiences teaching solely inside a Pre-K classroom. Their ability to speak to the potential benefits and drawbacks provides a clearer picture of how these unique learning environments operate. The two primary foci of academics and the multi-layered relationships were highlighted by the interviewees' responses. The next chapter will synthesize and make meaning from the data collected throughout the research process by looking toward potential policies and practices for the future.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This chapter explores the importance of academic development and relationships through the continuity found in a multigrade classroom by drawing on interview data from educators Arianna and Penelope. Their insights illuminate how extended time spent with the same students fosters both educational and social-emotional growth, shapes classroom dynamics, and influences family engagement. The chapter also addresses challenges that may emerge in prolonged teacher-student relationships and explores the misunderstandings that the teachers encountered during their time spent inside a multigrade classroom.

Summary of Findings

As the research process progressed, the goal was to focus on two key components of the multigrade classroom: academics and relationships. While these were the main two focuses of the study, an additional aspect that re-emerged was the misunderstanding and misconceptions around multigrade classrooms. The unique learning model allows teachers and their students to interact with one another for two or three school years, which provides a wider range of context for these classrooms versus single-grade classrooms. Penelope and Arianna both stressed that although children began in their classrooms as young as three, they were professional educators inside licensed classrooms and not daycare providers. Their roles were not limited to only childcare, but providing rigorous, yet age-appropriate instruction. Both educators emphasized that having students for multiple years enabled them to build a nuanced understanding of each child's learning style and emotional needs. This continuity allowed teachers to tailor

instructional strategies and provide emotional support with greater care, enhancing academic progress.

Following guidelines from Merriam and Tisdell (2016), coding from these interviews was focused on being "responsive to the purpose of the research." Initial codes were generated by identifying patterns, recurring phrases, and significant moments that aligned with the study's focus on academic and relational development in a multigrade classroom. Interviewee quotes were identified and coded based on relevance to academics, relationships, misconceptions, environment, or multiple codes. Quotes were then grouped together based on shared meaning and relevance. As coding progressed, these categories were placed into core themes that represented the focus of students' academic skills and the multiple relationships over time. This process allowed for clarity and refinement on what the research sought to explore.

Misunderstandings and Misconceptions

Both educators discussed the misunderstandings that came with being a multigrade teacher early in their interviews. With Great Horizons being a public Montessori school, there are already misunderstandings around what the Montessori curriculum entails. One common misconception is that these classrooms are unstructured, and the children are free to engage with the environment with few restrictions. Arianna explained that although parents had chosen to enroll their children at Great Horizons, many of them still did not understand what the Montessori philosophy and curriculum involved. Both Penelope and Arianna specifically mention there is a misunderstanding about their classrooms being a daycare. Arianna mentioned that parents were under the belief that the youngest children would typically be engaged in activities such as coloring versus receiving standards-based instruction. Penelope explained that people were confused as to how she could manage all the moving pieces of not only being a

teacher but having to manage three different grade levels of young children. Both educators also mentioned the confusion they were met with when explaining that they taught multiple grade levels all at once in their classroom, but visitors to their classrooms were often left surprised at the level of learning and interactions that were happening.

Academics

Providing students with a rigorous curriculum is the most important job of a school. A classroom of students, no matter what the demographics involved, will have a range of academic and social-emotional proficiencies. Classrooms across America are given curricula that are approved by a school district, and the teacher's job is to use the provided curriculum to instruct each student. The teacher is responsible for differentiating instruction and has to navigate this oftentimes with a limited amount of resources. Typically, teachers have 10 months to learn a student, what motivates them, and get the necessary academic growth out of them. Multigrade classrooms follow the same requirements of implementing instruction with the goal of student success, however, there is an alternative path these classrooms take.

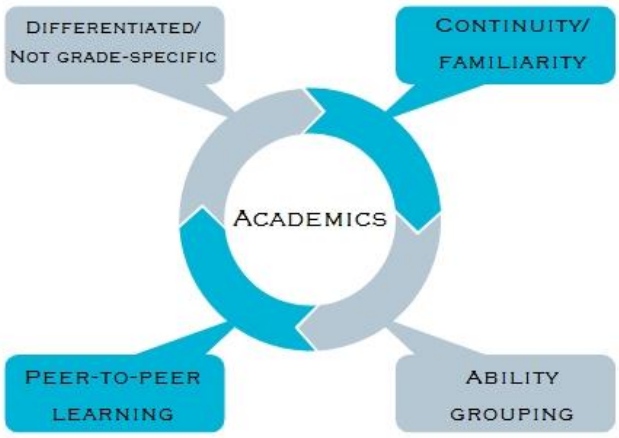

Figure 5.1: Academics

Both Arianna and Penelope emphasized that students in the multigrade classroom learn according to their developmental level and academic readiness rather than strictly by age or grade level. While many schools today provide a window for differentiated learning known as PLT, or personalized learning time, the educators explain that their classrooms were largely designed around providing each student with differentiated instructional lessons and strategies through the majority of the school day. Veenman (1995) details how the ability for younger or less-proficient students are able to advance academically when they are exposed to varying levels of curriculum versus a one-size-fits-all approach. The teachers in this study agree and highlighted the importance of autonomy that was granted to them in order to provide multiple students with varying levels of instruction. Both explained how the environment enabled them to modify lesson plans in real time and focus on individual student needs rather than delivering generalized lessons. This autonomy reduced time spent on unnecessary planning and increased instructional efficiency. This flexibility allowed younger students to engage with more advanced

material if they are ready, while also providing foundational support for those who need it, regardless of age or grade-level. This approach aligns with theories which stress the importance of meeting learners "where they are" (Vygotsky, 1978). Penelope supported this idea with her responses. Throughout the interview process, Penelope stated on multiple occasions, "I'm following the child," further emphasizing the importance placed on providing students with differentiated instruction in these classrooms.

With multiple grades inside the classroom, students were able to be grouped with one another based on their academic abilities. Traditional classrooms are designed for all learners to receive the same instruction throughout the school day aside from a small window of time which caters to personalized learning. Arianna regularly referred to a pacing guide, which is a document provided by the school district which states which standards are to be taught, as well as the specific order and the time frame in which these standards are to be taught. Arianna explained that she did not feel the necessity in rushing students through academic skills if they were not ready to move on and did not need to stick to the pacing guide. She prioritized student readiness over pacing compliance, allowing her to reteach, remediate, or scaffold lessons as necessary. Penelope agreed, explaining how the grouping of students based on ability allowed her to fluidly place students together, even at times having to place Kindergarten students with younger peers to work on foundational skills. She described how she grouped students based on readiness rather than age, enabling mixed groups to receive instruction tailored to their current level. This practice allowed for efficient differentiation within the classroom and ensured that all students receive instruction appropriate to their proficiency, enhancing engagement and growth. Little (2005) emphasized the importance of multigrade learning environments being able to readily provide differentiated learning to the students. Both teachers also noted how the ability

grouping in their classrooms allowed students to grow quickly. They attributed this growth to not being held to only teaching their students according to the pacing guide, but by moving to higher-level standards or remediating lessons if necessary, based on the students' needs. Penelope's quote of "All are winning technically because they're all going to show growth based on where they are" further emphasizes the potential benefits of this teaching strategy. Their insights explain how their multigrade classrooms created an environment where instructional decisions were guided by student development rather than district or school deadlines, allowing all learners to progress at a pace that catered to their academic readiness.

Both educators also highlight the importance of the classroom's structure in not only allowing but encouraging students to learn together and from one another. Previous studies from Gnadinger (2008) and Veenman (1995) explain how peer collaboration is a beneficial strategy for instruction inside the classroom by allowing students to have various roles, moving between learner, collaborator, and teacher, while also still being guided by a teacher. In this study, Arianna explained, "The younger ones were learning from the older ones as well, since they were all in it together. The three- and four-year-olds were able to see what the Kindergarteners were doing, so they caught on pretty quickly." While most classrooms will encourage students to collaborate with one another at various points of a school day for varied reasons, this environment provides the opportunity for not just collaboration among students, but also the chance for students to play the role of teacher by providing assistance or even direct instruction. The students who are doing the "teaching" are often required to show their mastery and understanding of a concept before they are allowed to teach their peers, which may boost confidence and promote critical-thinking skills according to a study from Lynch (2018). The students receiving the lessons also may feel more comfortable working with a peer versus an

adult. This shared learning can also promote collaboration and build stronger bonds between students.

Continuity was another recurring aspect that was mentioned by Penelope and Arianna. Teachers benefit from the continuity offered by multigrade classrooms, as they often instruct the same students across multiple years. Bailey, et. al, (2016) explain how students returning to a familiar classroom with a teacher they already know, and who already knows them well, are typically able to begin working on new lessons or tasks quicker than in a traditional classroom. They explain the transition period of returning to school is lessened, enabling the students and teachers to move into new lessons quickly. Arianna explained how this familiarity enabled her to quickly re-establish routines and build on prior learning, making instructional planning more responsive and targeted. Her statement of, "We know them well by the second (school) year. We know who they are and what they know" reinforces the benefit of the prolonged interactions between the teachers and their students. Penelope also explained the potential benefits of these long-term interactions by discussing the growth she saw in her students. She believes that the returning students were able to begin the school year with a shorter transition time due to the familiarity, which allows them to begin learning academic skills versus spending as much time going over classroom routines and expectations. Arianna noted that this familiarity significantly reduced the anxiety and learning curves typically associated with the start of a new school year, not only for students but also for herself. Students returned to classrooms where they already felt known, supported, and safe, which smoothed their transition into new academic challenges. Arianna observed, "At the beginning of the year, most of them don't know you and are not ready to leave their parents. But then seeing that they're coming back to the same teacher, the same friends the next year. . . it's not them starting over." This continuity helped provide some

comfort to young children at a time of year that can be fun and exciting but also induce nervousness and uncertainty. The figure below presents a visual summary constructed after analysis and interactions with these teachers that reflects a possible picture of this process.

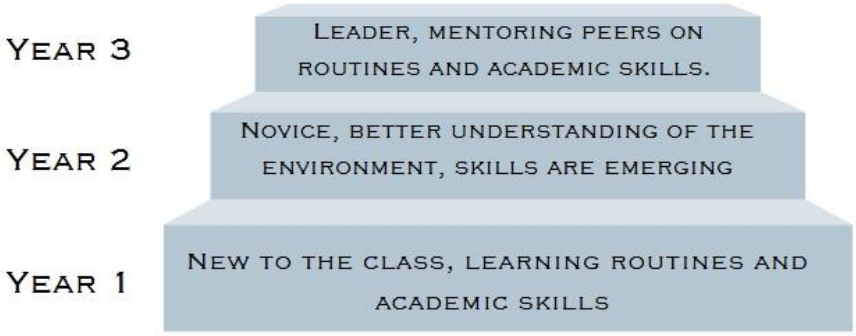

Figure 5.2

Environment

The physical environment of the teachers' classrooms was also important to the overall structure of making their environments inviting and successful. Great Horizons is a Montessori school, and the materials used in these classrooms were scaled to be used by younger children. As Penelope explained how the environment intentionally prepares the students in the classroom to cultivate respect for the space and each other, thereby setting the stage for a supportive learning community from day one, stating, "The classroom is prepared and ready. What you

expect them to get out of it, you already put in their environment. I want it tidy, clean, and in order before they enter, so I can teach them how to respect our environment and each other."

Gettman (1987) explains how Dr. Montessori was a firm believer in the importance of a prepared environment for all children, but especially younger students. The materials are designed to be colorful and interesting, and the teacher is mindful of order, organization, and placement of materials in the room. With Penelope mentioning that by preparing the environment properly, she is preparing the students to take care of the space and the other students, this falls in line with Sawyer's theory of three paradoxes, teacher, student, and curriculum, working together to promote a structure that promotes collaboration, academic learning, social-emotional learning, and flexibility.

Both educators' decision to send their children to Great Horizons was also an interesting and unexpected factor that emerged. Penelope and Arianna believed in the classroom structure well enough to educate or further grow their own children. Both of their children started in the multigrade classroom when they were three years old and designated as preschoolers. Penelope's son and Arianna's daughter both took the necessary assessments needed to be designated as Kindergarten students the following year. They both made mention of their children being academically proficient at their age but knew that their teacher would help them grow even further by not restricting the students to complete lessons based solely on their age or grade-designation. Arianna specifically mentioned again the classroom's ability to teach what the children need versus strictly being asked to follow a pacing guide and how it helped her daughter accelerate throughout the school year.

Relationships

In multigrade classrooms, students often interact across grade levels, which creates a natural space for mentoring, leadership, and peer support. Older students tend to assist younger ones with both academic tasks and classroom routines, while younger students benefit from modeling and guidance. Students typically remain in a multigrade classroom for more than one year, allowing deeper, more trusting relationships to form between teachers and students, as well as among peers. Teachers frequently adopt a facilitative role, promoting shared responsibility and group problem-solving. Multigrade settings also allow for extended relationships between teachers and families, which strengthen the "village" around each child. With the focus on these relationships being to highlight the interactions between student-to-student, teacher-to-student, and teacher-to-families, the interviews provided many examples of how this multi-layered aspect works and how the teachers found ways to make it work smoothly for themselves and their students.

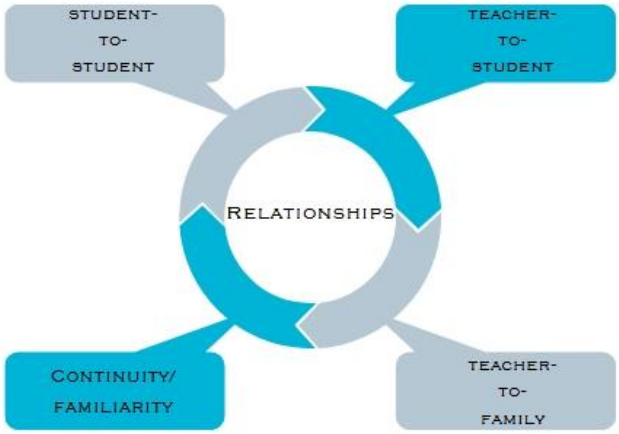

Figure 5.3: Relationships

Throughout the interviews, the teachers discussed how having returning students was helpful not only academically, but also for helping to establish and implement routines in the classroom. Arianna often relied on returning Pre-K or Kindergarten students to help model routines and expectations for their new peers. This peer mentoring enhanced classroom management and created a culture of mutual support. Penelope also discussed the importance of older students in helping to establish the culture of the classroom by modeling the expectations of the classroom. Penelope and Arianna reinforce the findings of research from Mcintyre, et. al, (1996) where they explain how this hierarchy creates a community that is beneficial to all involved. Teachers are not solely responsible for setting the expectations, which relieves them of some of the burden and can also free up their time and energy on other tasks that would be helpful to the students and the classroom. The older, returning students exhibit leadership skills and help model the routines and expectations for their classmates. This also corroborates

research from Gnadinger (2008) that highlights how the community being built, especially among the students, helps to quickly establish the expectations for the classroom.

Beyond academic routines, the long-term structure nurtured strong social bonds among the educators, the students, and their families. Penelope described how initial connections, such as birthday invitations, often blossomed into enduring friendships and community ties, stating, “The families become very close-knit with each other. Students see their classmates outside of school, and oftentimes their first friends are their classmates. They begin to interact as though they were an extended family.”

Classmates’ time together often blossoms into friendships and these relationships can be strengthened over a longer period of time in the multigrade classroom. When the friendships extend beyond the walls of the classroom and the families begin to interact more often, the bonds of community can be created and reinforced. Arianna also discussed how she was often invited to her students’ birthday parties or extracurricular activities by families. These connections extended beyond the classroom, strengthening the broader school community.

Additionally, families frequently requested specific teachers for their children and siblings, reinforcing the relational importance of the environment. Arianna reflected on a family whose multiple children passed through her classroom over several years, noting how such continuity deepened trust and collaboration between her and the parents. Penelope spoke of a specific family where she had siblings in her room at different parts of her career. Her statement of, “The parents knew me well enough to know their daughter would be taken care of” highlights how the long-term familiarity between her and this family was reinforced by their trust in her to educate and take care of two of their children.

Multigrade classrooms more accurately reflect a family or community structure than traditional classrooms where students are typically all the same age. Stuart et. al, (2006) previously explained that children often interact with other children of varying ages in their own families or neighborhoods and a multigrade classroom more accurately reflects the real world. Students in these classrooms must also navigate the various developmental stages of their classmates. Extended relationships between teachers and families helped foster a climate of trust that facilitated candid conversations about children's developmental and academic needs. Teachers engage with families over multiple years, leading to deeper trust and more personalized communication. This sustained connection aligns the home and school environments, creating a cohesive support system for the child. It also affirms the relational foundation of education, where learning is not isolated to the classroom but embedded in a web of supportive relationships, Penelope noted that when potential learning challenges arose, parents were more receptive to discussions about interventions or additional support because they trusted the teacher's deep familiarity with their child. This ongoing collaboration strengthened family confidence in the teachers and their classrooms and encouraged them to keep their children in the same classroom despite challenges, prioritizing personalized care for their children and communication with teachers that they trusted.

Because students remained in the classroom for multiple years, those who had been in the classrooms longer often played a pivotal role in modeling routines and helping to maintain classroom norms. Mcintyre, et. al, (1996) previously explored how teachers set the expectation for students to help one another, especially the "veteran" students. Arianna noted that this dynamic was especially powerful with students who had been with her since the age of three. Reflecting on their leadership, she shared, *"*Yes, especially the ones that started out as three.

They were able to help… the younger ones as well with the routines and expectations as well.*"* This quote illustrates how continuity allowed older students to take ownership of classroom culture, mentoring younger peers and reinforcing expectations by leading by example. In doing so, students were active contributors to a shared community, where routines were learned via interactions and passed down to other students rather than through top-down instruction solely from the teacher.

Penelope also recognized the value of established expectations and routines in fostering a stable and supportive classroom environment. She described how students who had already spent time in her classroom came in with a strong understanding of "how things work," requiring only minimal review at the start of a new school year. With returning students already familiar with procedures, norms, and teacher expectations the conditions were set at the beginning of the year for a smoother transition into learning. This continuity not only empowers returning students to begin their academic work with minimal delay but also frees the teacher to give more focused support and begin to build positive relationships to students who are newer to the classroom or in need of greater scaffolding. In this way, routines are sustained not just through teacher direction but through student familiarity with the environment and independence. The returning students model behaviors, expectations, and engagement strategies for their younger or newer peers, reinforcing a culture where collaboration and shared responsibility are key. Penelope's approach reflects the core strength of multigrade settings: the ability to leverage long-term relationships to foster both academic autonomy and social-emotional support, ensuring that all learners receive what they need within a responsive, community-oriented structure.

As parents, both educators made mention that their children being students inside a multigrade classroom was beneficial. Arianna mentioned the friendships her daughter created

during her time in this classroom, stating that she is still friends with some of her classmates to this day and they still communicate with each other. Penelope stated that her son would occasionally ask when school was starting back with an eagerness to return to the classroom. Penelope and Arianna knew first-hand the types of relationships that could be built inside a multigrade classroom, and in their eyes, their decision to have their children attend Great Horizons benefited their children socially.

Both teachers also mentioned that the prolonged relationship could occasionally have drawbacks. Penelope's example was of two students who did not get along during their Pre-K year and how it never got better the following school year. Arianna explained that sometimes the students got "too comfortable" with the teacher and needed reminders that there was mutual respect and boundaries that needed to be maintained. The students' transition into first grade was also something that Penelope mentioned and how after two or three school years together, this transition stirred up mixed emotions on occasions, stating, "You miss them, just like family after having them for three years. By the end, you are ready to see them fly out of the nest and go to big or better things."

Recommendations for Practice

The findings from this study highlight the unique strengths of multigrade classrooms in promoting both academic and relationship development. Through teacher interviews and allowing them to share their experiences and insights, it became evident that long-term relationships, flexible instructional practices, and community-centered routines contributed significantly to student success. The following recommendations are offered to educators, school leaders, and policymakers seeking to implement or support effective multigrade practices.

Academics. A central finding from this study was the way in which both teachers grouped students based on academic readiness rather than chronological age. This approach allowed for differentiation and more meaningful learning experiences. Arianna, for example, expressed that she did not feel an obligation to strictly follow district pacing guides, but was instead allowed to move students forward with higher-level standards and concepts or to revisit concepts based on their demonstrated understanding. Penelope similarly described flexible groupings that allowed students, regardless of age, to receive instruction at their current level. Previous research from Lynch (2018) shows that schools in Michigan found that despite data showing the benefit of multigrade classrooms on student growth, the programs were stopped with annual testing being a primary factor. Schools should look at progress of students versus a priority being placed on standardized testing.

Ability-Grouping. To support this practice, schools can provide flexibility in instructional planning that allows for grouping based on student proficiency versus solely being led by student's age and/or grade level. This flexibility would be especially beneficial in the core subjects of English Language Arts and math. While schools may implement personalized learning times, they are often a small portion of the day, leaving many students to learn inside of a one-size-fits-all learning model for the majority of the school day. Previous research from Lloyd (1999) found that multigrade classrooms can be advantageous for a wide range of learners, not only the most proficient students. This is attributed to the flexibility of the system already installed in the classroom and the teachers' knowledge and understanding that students operate on a wide spectrum of proficiency. The groupings of students should be flexible, allowing students to move in and out of groups based on their growth of the taught standard or concept. One example is the Morningside Model of Generative Instruction (MTA in Depth, 2025). This

model incorporates standards-based mastery and allows students to fluidly be grouped based on their proficiency level and allows students to move in and out of groupings as needed. However, Mason and Burns (1996) argue that children in multigrade classrooms may exhibit fewer gains since teachers may provide students with less challenging content. Additionally, Ansari (1997) mentions a study which suggests that kindergarten students inside multigrade classrooms performed lower academically than students who attended kindergarten-only classrooms.

Autonomy and Flexibility. This study highlighted the importance of instructional flexibility in supporting student growth. Teachers and schools prioritizing the needs of individual classrooms and students over district provided pacing guides can promote faster growth. This can be done while ensuring standards were still taught and in the recommended sequence. Allowing teachers to use their professional judgement allows for more authentic, student-centered instruction since the teachers know their students' abilities. Regular collaboration within the classroom, fostering peer-to-peer support and shared responsibility for learning can also promote student growth. Reid and Ready (2013) detail how these interactions among young children can be stimulating, both cognitively and non-cognitively.

Continuity. This ideology may meet the most resistance, especially from teachers who are comfortable teaching one grade level. However, there are many locations globally where continuity via looping, multigrade, or other methods are common practice. In Finland, looping is a common practice in elementary schools (Tourginy, et. al, 2020) and Escuela Nueva is a multigrade practice that began in Colombia, but has spread to countries worldwide (Le, 2018). The extended familiarity is beneficial for students because their teachers are mindful of what individual students need and how each student works and learns best. This would prove especially beneficial for the youngest students, empowering their teachers to properly set the

foundation for these students. A disadvantage to continuity would be an extended period of learning from an ineffective teacher. One parent's concern from Hegde & Cassidy (2004) states, "The only potential disadvantage that I can envision is that of not having a good relationship with the caregiver and getting stuck with that caregiver because he/she is looping with your child. That may complicate things further and the parent may want to move the child. . ." (p. 137). An ineffective teacher may stunt growth and cause students to regress, which could be especially problematic over multiple years.

The continuity would also assist with the social-emotional aspect of schools. Allowing students to return to a classroom with a teacher and peers they know as well as having that familiarity with the classroom itself can be comforting. Returning students would also build leadership skills organically by becoming the "veterans" of the classroom. Research from Mcintyre (1996) supports this, explaining this would ultimately become a cyclical occurrence, with the newest students moving into the leadership role. Previous research by Fu, et. al (1999) further explains how students would move between the roles. Slavin (2015) contends that the if foundation of the relationships are not forged with the belief that community is important, then the continuity over multiple years is wasted and can actually be harmful.

Piloting and scaling. While there are plenty of misconceptions surrounding multigrade education, there is also some intrigue. Implementing multigrade classrooms on a small scale, such as one Pre-K and Kindergarten class, would provide several benefits to elementary schools. With this small-scale change, or as Collins and Hansen refer to as "firing bullets, not cannonballs" (2011), the entirety of the school does not need to be interfered with to implement a pilot classroom. With schools being data driven, a comparison for students who spent Pre-K and Kindergarten with one teacher versus a student who spent these academic years in two separate

classrooms with two different teachers would provide comparative data within the same school. Schools would not be left to figure out how to create a multigrade classroom from nothing. Grant and Johnson (1995) encourage districts to "think big and start small" when encouraging the implementation of these classrooms, and researchers such as Naparan and Alinsung (2021), Little (2005), and Miller (1994) provide guides and frameworks on how to create and sustain these learning environments. Conversely, Veenman (1995) list potential issues with creating and installing multigrade classrooms. These include the integration of new curriculum, adjustments in instruction, lack of time for adequate teaching, attending to one group while instruction is being given to others.

Professional Development. Providing teachers with proper professional development is critical in the understanding and maintaining of multigrade classrooms. Districts or individual schools would need to offer training on how to differentiate content and how to effectively tailor instruction for multigrade settings. Teachers must also be provided with resources to create instructional plans that allow for flexible pacing and tiered instruction. This could be done via collaboration with educators who have multigrade experience to share best practices, lesson plans, and grouping strategies. Fu et. al (1999) and Veenman (1995) shared previous instances where the implementation of multigrade classrooms was created out of necessity and the proper guidance was not taken, leading to the failure of these classrooms. Proper professional development would also dispel some of the misconceptions surrounding multigrade classrooms. Allowing professionals to explain and give accurate depictions, both the benefits and the drawbacks, would help eliminate some of the misunderstandings and create a clearer path for those who are interested in designing, creating, and implementing multigrade educational environments.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study has several potential avenues that could be explored through future research projects. Some of these recommendations include original ideas for this study. One of these ideas was to further delve into the importance of the physical space of the classroom and its role in the multigrade structure. Further research on the layouts, materials, seating arrangements and other aspects would provide further insights into the environment. During the initial planning stages of this study, there was also discussion on including students and families in the process via interviews. Allowing students who have gone through the multi-year experience of this classroom to discuss their experiences would provide more firsthand accounts of these classrooms. The inclusion of families' insights would also provide several layers of information, including their experiences and potential guides for others, including school districts and other families, who are curious about this learning model.

Future research could also expand on this study by exploring more schools. This idea alone could take several potential paths. With Great Horizons being a public, Montessori school, including other public and private Montessori schools could expand the study. The inclusion of other schools, including non-Montessori schools, around the country who utilize multigrade education would also provide further data to be explored. Including teachers who teach in multigrade classrooms who serve different grade-levels aside from the Primary classrooms included in this study would also provide further context for this field of study.

A long-term study of multigrade classrooms would provide many potential avenues to explore. Following students throughout the multiple school years would allow for an extended timeframe to view their academic growth and how the teachers manage their progress. The

relationships between other students, their teacher, and their families' interactions with the school could also be explored by focusing on the building and maintaining, or potential deterioration, of these relationships.

Another recommendation for this study could be to focus on the expansion and scalability of this learning model. This recommendation could include several stakeholders inside the educational realm, including district leaders, policymakers, administrators, and other educational professionals. This avenue could also explore the potential challenges of implementing multigrade education. These challenges could vary from teachers and their ideas on multigrade education to district views, including policies, funding, and other coordination that would need to be researched.

Limitations of the Study

One limitation was the number of participants available for the study. The number of participants who met the criteria for this study was already limited, and non-agreement from some school principals further limited the number of participants who were available. Having a larger number of participants, including potentially being able to interview those who had administrative experience, would have provided a wider spectrum of insights and experiences. Additional participants would have more likely yielded more comparative data. With Penelope and Arianna working in the same school for several years, their insights were closely aligned. The timing of the data collection section of this study also created another obstacle. The participants who agreed to the interview had transferred away from Great Horizons, which required a shift in what data would be available to be collected. Documents such as classroom schedules and lesson plans would have been able to provide additional context to the answers

from the interviews. The physical environment was originally a major aspect that sought to be explored throughout this study. Due to not being able to access Great Horizons as readily as hoped, there was limited data available regarding classroom layouts or materials used inside the classrooms.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study highlighted the importance of how teachers and students, especially children in early education environments, can encourage growth via prolonged interactions with one another. With schools across the world seeking to provide a stable, efficient mode of educating their students, the importance of setting students up with a solid foundation cannot be overlooked. Multigrade education may sound like a new, trendy method inside the educational world, it has a long, rich history worldwide with some places using this model out of preference versus necessity.

Multigrade classrooms are more than a unique, out-of-the-box educational ideology, they are holistic environments of relationship-rich learning. These settings more closely mirror the structure of a family or a larger community, where individuals grow not only through instruction but through sustained relationships with peers and leaders of all types. By investing in these relationships over time, multigrade educators foster environments where students feel known, valued, and supported, both academically and emotionally. In this way, multigrade classrooms embody the principle of growing together, and learning becomes not just an individual journey but a shared experience for all involved.

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