How Does Multi-Age Grouping Work as a Tool for Differentiating Instruction in a Highly Diverse Student Population?
Lindsay Larson & Megan Sherrill
Glen Forest Elementary School
Fairfax County (VA) Public Schools
Submitted June 2003

Introduction
For the last two years we have been teaching at Glen Forest Elementary School in Falls Church, Virginia. Glen Forest is a Title I school. Seventy percent of our students are eligible for free and reduced lunch and 65 percent are English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). Our total school population is close to 1,000 students. At the beginning of the 2002-03 school year, we were beginning our second year of teaching. We teach second and fourth grades respectively. Given the diverse group of students, and the evidence that we must differentiate instruction, we discussed the problem of meeting the broad spectrum of our students’ needs. Albeit, the difference in grade levels, we were both experiencing the difficulties in addressing our students’ competency levels in reading confidence, independence, and fluency. Through the study of previous success models of Cross Age Teaching, we collaborated and designed small group activities for our selected second and fourth grade students to do together during language arts time.

Purpose of Study
Our purpose of study was to see how multi-age grouping can be a tool for differentiating instruction and creating successful literacy experiences in a highly diverse student population. A primary goal for second grade selected students was to develop the understanding and ability of reading for a purpose. A second goal was to develop the practice of reading independently; this goal involved being able to select appropriate texts, use a variety of word solving clues, and be able to recall and retell text events correctly. The primary goal for the selected fourth grade students was to develop a more positive image of themselves as readers as they worked as peer mentors for the second grade students.

Connection to Literature
Much has been written about Cross Age Teaching, or multi-age grouping using primary and upper elementary classrooms. Research supports the use of mentoring as a way to differentiate learning experiences for all involved students. At the Webster Magnet School in Minnesota, second graders and fourth graders were involved in a reading intervention program. The Webster Magnet School project was designed based on successful results from Marie Clay’s Reading Recovery program and Don Holdaway’s Shared Book Experience Technique.
It was “based on a number of instructional components found to be effective in fostering reading growth: repeated reading, coaching children in the use of strategies to foster independence in reading, writing, and one-to-one tutoring. Repeated reading was emphasized because this has been found to be an effective technique to build word recognition rate, accuracy, fluency, and reading comprehension.”

Another significant finding in “buddy reading” is that non-fluent readers can develop fluency when listening to a fluent reader (Taberski, 2000). Buddy reading also allows opportunities for readers to share their word solving strategies and supports their meta-cognitive thinking.

The basis for data collection involved in our study was observation during small guided reading groups. The literature basis for designing these groups and setting the various purposes came from strategies laid out in the Fountas and Pinnel text *Guiding Readers and Writers*. This text was also used to aid in the development of Reading Interest surveys which were used to determine student’s perceptions of their own reading ability and potential to succeed as a reader. Another important component involved in the research was building a sense of community and trust between our students. The literature basis of this community building was *Responsive Classroom*. A wide variety of children’s literature was also used in the study. The selection of this literature was based upon both the student’s ability, student interest, and instructional objectives. A list of the children’s books used is included in the references section.

**Data Collection**

Our process of data collection included a variety of methods. These methods included pre and post Reading surveys, student interviews, teacher observations, anecdotal records and collaborative teacher meetings. We met on a daily basis to gauge the success of the research and to make any necessary adjustments. Due to the fact that both of us had class to teach full time, we implemented our collaborative multi-age reading groups during our language arts blocks.

The fourth grade students first went the second grade classroom to work on community building activities using the Responsive Classroom model. This model is based upon the idea that in order for students to be academically successful, they need to first feel secure and socially successful in the classroom environment. Based upon this research, we felt that before starting with the reading goals we needed to focus on building trust and comfort among our students. After a month of community building activities using the “Morning Meeting” model (see Appendix A) laid out in the Responsive Classroom, the fourth grade students went to the second grade students’ classroom three days a week to begin teaching them in a small guided reading group setting or one-on-one, as determined by need.

To determine our reading group, we first gave Reading Surveys (Appendix B) to the students involved in the research to determine their current perceptions of themselves as readers as well as their perceived ability and confidence in
themselves as readers. This information was used to target individual areas of need when forming the multi-age reading groups. Due to the varied areas of focus, the surveys were used to determine different areas of need at the fourth and second grade levels. The formula used in creating the surveys was based upon a sample survey from the text *Guiding Readers and Writers*, and modified to fit each grade level. For example, when reviewing surveys at the fourth grade level, one question that was of particular interest and focus for us was, “Do you think you could teach someone else to read? Why or why not?” Most of our fourth grade students who were in the target group of the research answered “No” to this question, giving the reason that they felt they were not good readers or could not read at all. These kinds of perceptions determined one focus of the project; that being to raise the students levels of confidence in themselves and their abilities in order for them to become more successful as readers.

At the second grade level, we were focusing on the students’ ability to become more independent readers, and to strengthen their confidence in themselves to complete reading tasks independently without frequent direction and guidance. Due to this, the survey questions of interest to us at the second grade level were primarily those dealing with a personal interest in reading and what they felt they needed to learn in order to become better readers. These surveys were used as a pre-analysis method for forming our multi-age student groups.

**The Approach**

Once we had determined our student groups, and narrowed our goals and focus for the students, we worked on choosing appropriate texts and objectives for the guided reading groups. Aside from our project objectives, the reading groups focused primarily on the teaching of strategies to improve reading skills. These strategies included, using picture clues to decode text meaning, re-reading for fluency and comprehension, and retelling. Teacher created worksheets were used to guide the students, clearly focusing on the objective for the lesson, as well as to provide feedback to the students and to us (Appendix C and D).

Due to the focus population in our fourth grade class being comprised of children with special learning needs, we felt it best to rehearse the text they would be learning, as well as partner them with a student with higher reading ability. Our fourth grade students were instructed in a particular focus or strategy for the day, and then worked in groups consisting of two fourth grade students, one with special learning needs and one with a high level of reading ability, and two to three second grade students. They would spend one to two lessons working altogether in a small group, and then sometimes branch off into one-on-one “buddy reading” type groups. The decision to have our students remain in a small group setting, or branch off in to one-on-one reading buddies was based upon our observations and anecdotal records of the first two lessons, as well as individual student needs.
After each small group reading lesson, each of us would have an informal conversation without students, to determine their perception of how the group went, and to assess how their individual goals were being met. In some of the cases, the small group setting was ideal for meeting all the individual needs, as opposed to just some of the members’ needs. In this situation, we would keep the dynamic of the group intact and continue to observe and conduct informal interviews for assessment. However, in other situations, the fourth grade students with higher reading ability would, in effect, be running the whole group, thus overshadowing their counterpart, which was a fourth grader with special learning needs. Conversely, at the second grade level, for some students the small group setting was effective for keeping them on task and staying focused. However, others needed more direct attention in order to remain engaged. In the situations where we felt the target goals were not being met, we would change the dynamic of the group switching to a “one-on-one reading buddies” setup. This seemed to be more effective for some of the students in terms of giving them opportunities to feel successful, as well as the ability to focus on their tasks and responsibilities.

In order to measure the objective of having our second graders independently reading and completing reading tasks, the fourth graders would give them daily assignments when they met. The second graders were thus accountable for their assignments and could not meet with their group or buddy until the assignment was complete. The fourth graders were given the task of ensuring that the younger children had completed their assignments, and checking to ensure that they had understood what they were to do. To reinforce the importance of the community and the relationship between the students, a sharing component was introduced. During this time each of the group members or buddies would share something that he or she enjoyed about their reading, or something they were having difficulty with. In order to assist the students, they all kept an Independent Reading Log of their homework reading and shared one entry with the other students (Appendix E).

Findings

We found that overall, the multiage groups and partner reading set ups had an extremely positive and effective impact on all of our students’ ability to succeed. For part of our final assessment piece, we administered a Post reading survey (Appendix F) to measure the changes in the student’s perceptions of themselves. We used these surveys, as well as individual conversations and observations, to measure the effectiveness of our research.

The pre and post-reading surveys were compared at the end of the study. The four fourth grade participants with special learning needs determined themselves to be much more competent in their reading abilities, as well as their ability to teach others, at the end of the study. These same students demonstrated a major increase in their overall motivation and enthusiasm for reading. Throughout the project they diligently prepared for the lessons, and volunteered information about their progress. We observed an overall increase in
the participant’ willingness to communicate orally in their multi-age group. As their confidence grew, their ability to communicate and demonstrate effective reading strategies increased. This enthusiasm was translated to other areas of study, including two fourth grade participants volunteering to share their science projects with another second grade class.

The four fourth grade students, who had strong reading ability from the beginning, also demonstrated increased enthusiasm and motivation toward teaching others through participating in the project. These students would consistently complete any outside assignments needed in order to participate, and share with their peers the effectiveness of working with a group. One of the four students with high reading ability, made the connection between the improvement and increased independent reading ability of her second grade buddy, to the fact that, “he just wants someone to listen to him read, that’s what makes him do the work.” We felt this statement really summed up the importance of all of our research: making students feel significant would increase their ability to succeed.

At the second grade level, the students involved showed an overall increase in their ability to work independently and successfully. They consistently had their reading group assignments to show the fourth grade students when they arrived, and enthusiastically shared what they had learned. The pre and post surveys also showed that the second grade students had a much better idea and understanding of what skills and strategies were necessary to become a reader. They also all reported enjoying at least some kinds of reading in the post survey, something that was not shown in the pre-survey. Through teacher interviews with the second grade students, we found their motivation to continue reading and completing reading assignments independently was directly linked to the promise of sharing it within their multi-age group or with their individual buddy.

Reflections

At the outset of our project, we thought small reading groups would be the key component for conducting our research. However, as we began the process, we realized that due to the fact that we were dealing with such a diverse group of students, each having their own individual needs, we would need to diversify our research techniques in order to get optimal results, and create a positive experience for our students.

Originally our plan was to have two fourth grade students, one student with special learning needs or ESOL, and one student with a high level of reading proficiency to lead the groups. However, when we began the groups with this dynamic, it became apparent to us that the students with the high level of reading ability were in some cases taking a leadership role while the other students remained quiet and in the background. The small group dynamic was also not effective for all of our second grade participants. While some of the students were actively involved and attending, some were prone to distraction and remained silent in the group setting. Some of the second graders did not seem
to feel responsible for their assignments or actively share and participate in the small guided reading groups.

Once we observed that the small group dynamic was not effective for all of the students, we re-evaluated our research methods. We decided that a one-to-one buddy reading set up would provide the opportunity for our fourth grade students to assume a leadership role, as well as provide the specialized attention that some of our second graders needed in order to stay on track and focus on their responsibilities and assignments. Changing the dynamic did prove effective, but in retrospect this may have been a more effective means for conducting our research from the outset.

Our research also led us to the conclusion that this type of multiage learning would be effective in one way or another for all of our students. Upon reflecting on our research, we determined that the positive impact of multiage groups on our student’s academic success would only be furthered if it involved all of our students at different times and extended throughout the whole school year. The use of pairing our classes to teach the fundamentals of Responsive Classroom from the beginning of the year then extending it in to the other content areas as appropriate is also some that we a definitely considering further for the future.

Although the students were highly motivated during the collaborative groups, this motivation did not necessarily carry over into other academic areas. For example, while one of our second graders may feel especially motivated and accountable for the work they were doing for the older students, this didn’t consistently transfer to other assignments in the other academic content areas. Therefore, extending the time that we collaborated may keep motivation more consistent and permanent.

Overall, when reflecting on our project, the positive impact that the multiage groups and pairings had on all of our students was overwhelmingly successful. The ability of children to teach and learn from one another is expansive and the possibilities for these collaborations are endless. The most positive aspect of our research was that we were able to translate a fairly consistent method of grouping and pairing students and tailor this method to reach a vast array of individual student needs. When working with such a diverse population of students, the ability to assess and meet individual needs is essential. Our research provided us with a unique opportunity to differentiate our instructional methods to provide positive and successful learning experiences for our students.

Working together on this project proved to be very useful in determining the needs of our students and generating ideas to develop differentiated instruction. It gave both of us an opportunity to express our concerns about certain students and develop an activity to encourage a positive response to reading.

We feel the selection of texts based on shared interest of both grade levels influenced the success of the mentoring.

The second grade class as a whole looked forward to the fourth graders’ visits during the shared morning meeting time. They responded positively to the
fourth graders while they were in the classroom, and wrote them letters thanking them for sharing their morning meeting activities. The second graders were eager to learn who was going to have the chance to work with the fourth grade students.

The selected group of second graders who worked in small groups with the fourth graders showed positive reading growth in the following areas:

- returning to the text to look for details and confirm understanding.
- developing voice fluency as an oral reader
- expressing interest in reading books similar to the books they read with their fourth grade mentor

Implications

This research study experience has shown the positive effectiveness of multi-age mentoring. The findings of both classrooms suggest that this would be even more successful if the mentoring occurred throughout a longer period during the school year, therefore if we were to plan for multi-age mentoring in our classrooms next year, we would begin earlier in the year. By beginning earlier, we also feel we could include more of our students, if not all. Additionally, through our findings we feel it would be optimal if a fourth grade mentor worked one-on-one with a second grade student. Lastly, if given more time, to continue our focus in language arts we would like to develop mentoring activities to foster writing development.

References


