AFFORDANCES AND CONSTRAINTS OF MULTI-AGE CLASSROOMS:

AN ANALYSIS OF TEACHER AND STUDENT EXPERIENCES

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AN ANALYSIS OF TEACHER AND STUDENT EXPERIENCES

A Thesis

by

Gloria Garcia Godinez

Spring 2019

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my mother and father, Claudia and Eliseo, who instilled

my love for education at a young age and determination to reach my dreams.

Me gustaría dedicar este tesis a mi madre y mi padre, Claudia y Eliseo, quienes me enseñaron

un amor por la educación desde chica y la determinación de alcanzar mis sueños.

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ABSTRACT

AFFORDANCES AND CONSTRAINTS OF MULTI-AGE CLASSROOMS:

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This teacher action research study focuses on the experiences of both teachers
and students in a multi-age classroom after teaching a combination classroom. A mixed-
methods approach was selected for this study including qualitative and quantitative data.
Grounded theory was chosen in order to examine interviews of students and teachers to
retell their experiences. Additionally, STAR Reading, a district wide assessments, were
retrieved to get a better understanding of how students compare academically with
students not attending a multi-age class when students from the lower level were using
upper grade level curriculum in the classroom or accelerated curriculum during their ELA
time. As a result, the data showed that the students were progressing with or better than
their grade level peers. Contributing factors that could be the cause of this could be the
classroom community that a teacher builds or the accelerated curriculum that the fourth

grade students used. However, concerns about managing a multi-grade classroom is still a concern that teachers face due to the added stress of planning and preparing for a combination classroom. Students had their own concerns about being grouped by grade level during split level curricular time.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Background

Multi-grade classrooms, alternatively known as combination, multi-level, composite, and multi-age classrooms have been utilized in schools as a way, to provide instruction to more than one grade level in a self-contained classroom (Mason & Stimson, 1996, p. 439). Combination classrooms have become increasingly popular in rural areas where schools are faced with disparities in student to teacher ratios and it becomes a necessity to combine grade levels in one classroom due to high or low enrollment of students. Since this model has also offered cost-saving options for many institutions, it has become a favorable option. Schools and principals have recognized multi-grade classes as a cost-effective solution for their sites (Mason and Dopener, 1998, p.165). However, critiques of this class model are concerned with the lack of resources and problems behind designing educational formats that conserve money (Thomas, 2012, p. 1058). Moreover, teachers do not feel equipped to teach all subject areas to both grade levels simultaneously and approach end of the year standards to a diverse student population.

Statement of Problem

Over the years, multi-grade classrooms have been regarded cautiously by education stakeholders including teachers, parents, and students. Common perceptions about combination classes include the belief that students will suffer insufficient grade level mastery. Parents have feared that teachers were not equipped with enough experience, time,

and knowledge to teach two curricula to multiple age groups of students. Similarly, teachers of combination classes complain of extended work hours in order to prepare for daily lessons and the integration of two curricula for each subject. Despite these commonly held beliefs, the experiences of some teachers and students who teach and learn in combinations classes are more positive about these classrooms. More understanding and awareness about the different elements of teaching and learning in these multi-age spaces may offer options to re-thinking the utility of these unique classroom arrangements (see Figure 1).
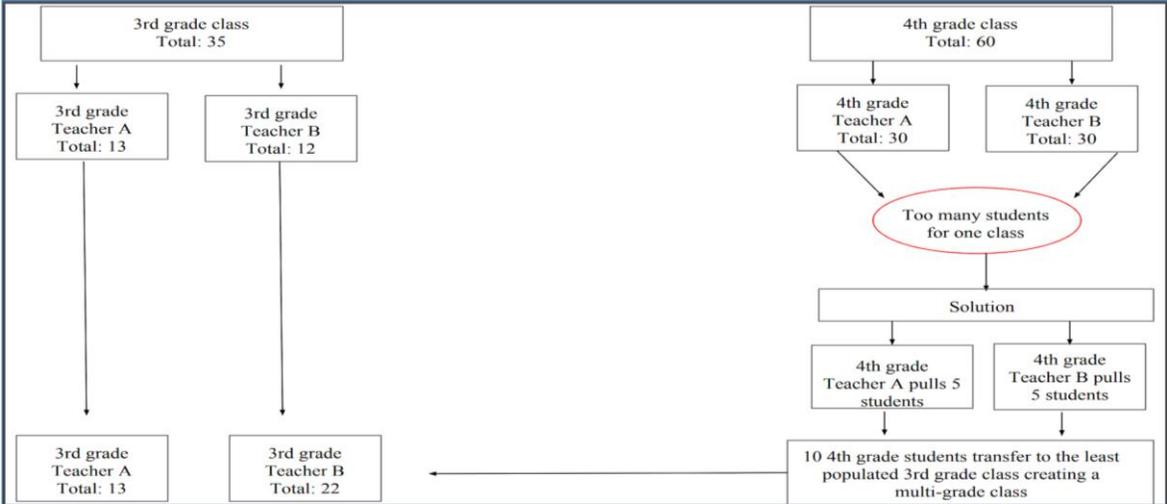
Figure 1. An overview of multi-age classrooms.

Significance of the Study

The findings from this study allowed stakeholders of multi-grade classrooms (teachers, administrators, parents, and students) to see potential beneficial aspects of combination classroom composition. The study examined the beliefs of students and teachers involved in one multi-age classroom at Lincoln Elementary. Pseudonyms for the location and the students were used for confidentiality purposes. With a population of roughly 1,900 people, Lincoln Elementary is located in Lincoln, a town in rural northern California.

According to the California School Dashboard, Lincoln Elementary is composed of a predominantly Hispanic community with 92.9 % of the population being socioeconomically disadvantaged. During this study, I was a teacher researcher at Lincoln Elementary, with two years of teaching experience. The first year at this site, I was assigned to a fourth and fifth grade multi-age classroom. In this study, I followed my fourth and fifth grade students in order to determine how, and to what degree, combination classrooms offer academic growth to learners and innovative teaching opportunities. I also interviewed two teachers, students in a split-grade class, and students not in a split-grade shared their teaching or learning experiences in a combination classroom through interviews and district wide reading assessments. This study also investigated the most current literature on multi-age classrooms and the potential for positive learning outcomes for both students and teachers when using accelerated curriculum or the fifth grade ELA curriculum in the fourth and fifth grade class. The research in this study intends to answer the following research questions:

1. How do fourth grade students experience learning in a multi- grade class as compared to students not in a multi-grade class?

2. How do teachers experience teaching a multi-grade class?

3. What is the impact of using an accelerated curriculum on learners in a multi-age class?

The findings of this study may better inform educational stakeholders of the possible affordances and constraints of multi-age classrooms by providing and understanding elements that influence student learning while being in a combination class. Teachers have reported to feel overwhelmed and perceive multi-grade classrooms as, "problematic because of the need to deal with the two curricula" (Mason & Burns. 1994, p. 41). An analysis of

combination classrooms provided teachers with suggestions to approach a daily schedule with an emphasis in ELA in a split-grade class.

The study at Lincoln Elementary presented opportunities to structure a multi-grade class. By gathering data from first-hand experiences of students in my combination class, I compared the academic outcomes of students in my multi-age classroom with those students who were not attending a split-grade class. Due to the uneven enrollment of students and the number of teachers at the site and fiscal constraints, combination classrooms are not diminishing. However, findings from teachers in this study help us better understand the limited nature of daily support and pose that there are insufficient programs and professional developments to support educators stepping into this position.

Definition of Terms

Combination Classes/ Multi-Age Class/ Multi-Grade Class/ Split-Grade

A class in which students from two adjacent grades are grouped within one classroom under one teacher. It is a tool that school administrators can use to manage uneven class sizes and conserve scarce facility and personal resources (Thomas, 2012, p. 1058).

Common Core State Standards: CCSS

The Common Core is a set of high-quality academic standards in mathematics and English language arts/literacy (ELA). These learning goals outline what a student should know and be able to do at the end of each grade. The standards were created to ensure that all students graduate from high school with the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in college, career, and life, regardless of where they live. Forty-one states, the District of Columbia, four territories, and the Department of Defense

Education Activity (DoDEA) have voluntarily adopted and are moving forward with the Common Core (Corestandards.org).

English Language Arts: ELA

The American National Council of Teachers of English separates English and language arts into five basic categories: reading, writing, speaking, listening and viewing. In elementary school, language arts classes focus on basic reading, writing and linguistic/communication skills.

Limitations of the Study

This study sought to understand how combination classes originated and how their design continues to impact teachers and students today. While the concerns and negative perceptions of teachers, parents, administrators, and researchers were important to cover, most important, was current research on combination classrooms and the potential benefits to students and the teachers who teach them. While thoughts and concerns of students and teachers were shared in this study, the study did not cover longitudinal experiences and attitudes towards a multi-age classroom after this study. Additionally, while parents are important stakeholders of multi-age classrooms, they were not interviewed nor investigated in depth to gain their perspectives. While the findings from teacher and students in this study reported positive benefits of multi-age classrooms, this study cannot be generalized to all school settings and stakeholders. Overall, the focus of this study included analysis of data from one combination classroom in a rural, northern California school. The study does hope to add to the research on multi-age classrooms and the potential longitudinal academic success of students in these classrooms.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Lincoln Elementary is a K-8 school serving 401 students with 91% of the student population characterized as socioeconomically disadvantaged and 31% English Learners. As stated by the California Dashboard (2018), the school performs below standard in both mathematics and ELA. Lincoln Elementary is located in rural northern California where, for the most part, there are two teachers per grade level. However, due to student enrollment or financial constraints, multi-age classrooms are prevalent at Lincoln Elementary during the study. In order to understand the origins of this classroom model, an overview of initiatives and popularized classroom teaching practice are reviewed. Student population in both rural and urban schools in the United States, affect classroom models that have led to split-grade classroom models. Regardless of urban or rural school settings, multi-age classrooms affect schools of uneven enrollments or schools that may have financial constraints.

Multi-Age Classrooms

History of Multi-Age Classrooms

Combination classrooms became increasingly popular, given the growing student population and increase in student-teacher ratios in public schools. Mulryan-Kyne (2007) considers this classroom composition more prevalent in smaller, rural schools, where school enrollments fluctuate with the staff that is present to support the amount of students (p.501). The beginning of multi-grade classrooms in the U.S. dates back to the 19th century when Horace Mann, an American education reformer, advocated for "common classrooms" that

became more popularly known as one-room schools (Aina, 2001, p. 219). Later, schools became separated by grade levels but one room classrooms continued to co-exist. While the multi-age classroom model has impacted education in the past, they continue to impact schools today and are evident in many places around the world where student populations and educational budgets constraints may influence the formation of these class types.

The Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) of 1990 also impacted the growth of multi-age classrooms. The reform was generated to improve low-performing schools by allocating money to schools that were demonstrating progress in their state tests (Slaton, et al., 1997, p. 5). The program, "embraced the multi-age philosophy and mandated that every school in the state provide an ungraded Primary School Program" (Mariano & Kirby, 2009, p. 1). Since then, Horace Mann's ideologies of creating a common school for all grade levels and KERA's push to improve school performance, impact education through the popularized multi-grade classroom model. According to Thomas (2012), the, "cost-saving considerations become particularly important when state budgets are tight and education funding cuts loom" (p. 1058). Such schools found themselves having to create multi-grade classes to ensure that their students' needs were being met. Similar to the KERA, the California Class Size Reduction program of 1996 offered schools money for higher achievement scores. While the program intended to raise achievement scores by having smaller classroom sizes, class sizes did not stay consistent year to year. By March 1996, Mason and Stimson (1996) found that California had, "indicated that 83% of schools contained one or more combination classes" (p. 448). In order for schools to receive financial assistance, combination classrooms became resourceful in creating classroom sizes acceptable for funding and supporting students based on their individual needs. The California Class Size Reduction Program of 1996 represents

an example of political change that empowered multi-age classrooms to become typical classroom structures in schools. The class reduction in California would empower more schools with funding if classes were smaller; as small as 20 students in a class. While, multi-grade classrooms were increasing, perspectives on this class model became unfavorable.

Historically, the United States has become familiar with multi-age classrooms due to initiatives that have passed, nevertheless, foreign countries have used multi-grade classrooms to meet similar needs. In Ireland, "one in three children [are] being taught in these settings in the primary level" (Quail & Smyth, 2014, p. 80). In fact, class compositions as described above, became favorable in small school settings due to the cost-saving benefits offered to schools who are faced with smaller student population. As a result, it became easier for schools to form multi-age classrooms instead of having to pay for another teacher's salary. While rural areas are forced to create multi-age classrooms because of small student population, urban areas create composite classrooms due to overcrowded classrooms. Despite the school demographics, multi-grade classrooms exist around the world.

Concerns about Multi-age Classrooms

While Thomas (2009) claims that combination classrooms are intended to save money, schools, parents and teachers often do not see it that way. Multi-age classrooms endure social stigmas including low academics and time constraints. Quail and Smyth (2014) suggest that combination classrooms can, "impact [...] academic and social outcomes", such assumptions impact perceptions of this class model" (p. 81). Parents feel that their students will not be adequately challenged to meet their grade level standards. Mason and Doepner (1998), interviews of principals in *Principals' Views of Combination Classes* acknowledge combination classrooms as stressful because of teacher stress, having to address parent

concerns, and decision- making of curriculum (p. 163). Similarly, Song et al. (2009), found that parents were apprehensive stating that, "The first barrier is usually dissatisfaction and rejection by parents" of not thinking that their child is going to obtain adequate education based on the, "quality of instruction" (p. 2-3). In a survey for parents of multi-grade classrooms, Cornish (2006) found the following:

> Parents' lack of certainty about how a composite class operates is evident from the result that almost half the parents (49%) were unsure whether the teacher would spend more time with the younger-grade children, and virtually equal numbers agreed (25%) and disagreed (26%) that this would be the case (p. 131).

As a result, teachers are stressed from the pressure to assure parents about student learning and planning curricula for both grade levels.

In *Teachers' Views of Combination Classes*, Mason and Burns (1995) question 35 randomly selected combination class teachers in three districts in Southern California to share their perspectives on multi-grade classes. Teachers express their concerns with limited time to teach and because of this, a need to focus on an increasingly narrow curriculum of core subjects (p. 39). They conclude that teachers emphasize only core subjects, such as English and mathematics since the other subjects would be harder to plan and find time to teach. As a result, educators use mixed methods to teach subjects to each grade level, where a teacher teaches one subject to one grade level in groups during class and the other grade level group works independently and then switch. Similarly, Mason and Burns (1995) found that, "teachers approached combination classes with a mixed grouping strategy", allowing more individualized instruction due to the varied abilities (p.40). When KERA first emerged and more multi-grade classrooms were mandated, Slaton et, al. (1997) interviews teachers who were close to retiring and decided to retire after the mandate. He found that 74% of experienced teachers decided to retire based on aspects of KERA (p. 8). In fact, "sixty

percent of Retirees and 45% of Nonretirees were opposed to multi-age grouping", giving evidence that even experienced teachers felt that this would be stressful (Slaton et al., 1997, p. 9). Concerns associated with combination classrooms arised from teachers, students, and parents.

Benefits of Combination Classrooms

Negative stigmas associated with multi-age classrooms are prevalent, however, additional effects presented by research could enforce positive views on multi-age classrooms. Olaiya (2001) claims that split-grade classrooms allow for students to be in known environments year after year, increase social interactions due to different ability levels, and have the same teacher (p. 220). She suggests that students could potentially do better, having prior knowledge of their class environment. In Veenman's (1995) study of multi-age classrooms, he argues that, "Students have a chance to form relationships with a wider variety of children than is possible in the traditional same-age classroom, leading to a greater sense of belonging, support, security, and confidence" (p. 322). Positive benefits of multi-grade classrooms reflect on Vygotsky's (1978) Social Development Theory. The theory states that children learn through social interactions, "group members should have different levels of ability so more advanced peers can help less advanced members operate within their ZPD", resulting in a multi-age classroom to be an optimal learning environment (Sivakumar & Thirumoorthy, 2018, p. 143). Research in multi-grade classrooms such as McIntyre, et al. (1996), focus on Vygotsky's Social Development Theory as an asset in combination classrooms where, "students experienced many opportunities to talk, to demonstrate, to justify, to clarify, and to assist one another in the social construction of knowledge" (p. 387). Comparatively, in *Principals' Views of Combination Classes* (1998), some principals also

agreed that multi-age classrooms, "meet students' social needs" (p. 164). Most studies, such as the ones mentioned above, focus on the inferior grade in a classroom and their ability to learn from their peers. However, superior grade level students in a classroom can also benefit from being in a split-grade classroom. Moller and Hightower (2008) say that students in this class model could benefit from being role models and target social-emotional skills (p. 742). Development of social learning is important in a split-grade class, however meeting grade level standards are important to consider as well.

Since two grade levels are taught in a multi-grade classroom, students who could be challenged would benefit from advanced curriculum, while other students could benefit from reviewing material that has not been mastered. Mason and Burns (2002), focused on student achievements based on classroom composition. They found that students in some combination classrooms, on average have higher ability scores, therefore, arguing that higher achieving students are placed in these classrooms for their abilities to work independently (p. 220). Veenman (1995) and Mason and Burns (2002) are major contributors of this topic. While Veenman (1995) argues that students did no better or worse, Burns and Mason (2002) claim that this could be attributed to the pre-selection of students (p. 209). If students are being pre-selected for multi-grade classrooms based on their independence and higher academics, it could result in a negative effect when comparing and measuring effects on academics.

A major factor impacting the success of combination classes is the degree of teacher experience. In Quail and Smyth's (2014) analysis of multi-age classrooms and staff, teachers were expected to teach two or more curriculums in a class. However, they suggested that no matter what the class composition is, teacher experience mattered more. In a similar

study, Unrath (1999) discovers instruction as the underlying variable of academic achievement, explaining that, "The critical variable in achievement research is usually the nature of the instructional process, not the nature of the organizational process" (para.12). The researchers argued that teacher experience was one of the biggest factors that influence academic success in a mixed-age classroom. Researchers can hypothesize that more experienced teachers are better candidates for a multi-grade classroom since they are familiar with curricula and have practiced a variety of instructional models to facilitate their students. On the other hand, first year teachers are getting acclimated to their position while learning new curricula. Richards et al. (2016) aim to uncover possible indicators of teacher burnout. He found that a major indicator is teacher stressors relating to burnout (p. 526). Research may suggest that the more a teacher must do, such as planning and teaching double the curriculum, could lead to teacher burnout. As mentioned above, teachers continue to struggle with stress levels in a split-grade classroom due to daily preparation for the classroom. Miller (1991) interviews and surveys teachers in this position and found that, "Over half said it was more difficult. Teachers also believe that "assisting individual children" and "planning" were more difficult in the multi-grade classroom" (p. 4). Not only is this stressful for teachers due to added stress, but teachers are core contributors to multi-grade classrooms.

Instructional Practices in Multi-age Classrooms

To better facilitate multi-age classrooms, thematic and student- centered instruction is favorable due to its attributes to facilitate a range of students in one classroom. Thematic and project-based pedagogy are preferred by teachers since they are student-centered (Smit & Engeli, 2015, p.138). Student- centered instruction is driven by a student's inquiry process. Ritland and Eighmy (1993) believe that this instruction can be performed in

a multi-grade class if , "A skilled teacher can use these child-centered approaches while not losing sight of the benchmarks that might be assessed in the standardized tests with which most schools must comply" (p. 174). Another teaching practice appropriate for split-grade classrooms is differentiated instruction for its child-centered approaches. Smit and Humpert (2012) propose that since instructional methods are most important when looking at the academic success of students, the differentiated instruction (DI) model offers better outcomes in a combination classroom. Differentiated instruction helps a, "teacher to plan strategically to meet the needs of every student" (Smit & Humpert, 2012, p. 1153). Since schools popularize individualized instruction, combination classes are prevalent because of the opportunity that teachers provide their students with exposure to a class with mixed abilities (Smit & Humpert, 2012, p. 1154). Therefore, allowing all students to learn at their own pace. Similarly, Miller (1990) compares 21 quantitative studies of students in a combination class with those who were not in a combination class to measure the effects including academics (p. 6). In his findings, he concludes that due to the differences in grade levels, higher student academic achievement is attained. When compared to a straight grade classroom, the DI model contributes to the academic achievement in the combination classroom. The model requires teachers to use multiple strategies to teach a skill in class, giving students the opportunity to learn multiple approaches to master a skill. This may not happen in straight grade classrooms since teachers may not feel encouraged to use multiple teaching strategies since a straight grade classroom contains one grade level. Sumit and Humpert (2012) explain that, "DI intervention experienced significantly greater mathematics achievement than student who did not receive DI" (p. 1154), demonstrating that that the DI model is a teaching method that could be beneficial in all classrooms. Additionally, Mortazavizadeh, et al. (2017)

interviews teachers to obtain perspectives about teaching a split-grade class and found that teachers were using a variety of teaching methods that single-grade classes did not (p. 359). Kobelin (2009), retells her experiences with multi-age classroom and how differentiated instruction may occur more in combination classrooms due to mixed abilities, whereas straight grade classroom tend to have a universal approach to curriculum and instruction for the abilities in the classroom because of the age and grade level curricula (p.10). This teaching method supports students in a combination class and serves as an asset to exhibit success in learning and teaching as demonstrated by achievement tests. As mentioned above, researchers advocate that the instruction of the educator is key and class composition is not a determining factor of student academic success in a combination classroom.

Since teachers plan for multiple subjects a day in combination classroom, teachers express that being in this position is stressful (Morgan & NicCraith, 2015, p. 14). Koblin (2009) explains that she tried to use the differentiation model by trying to align all the standards in math. However, she found that creating leveled groups work better to ensure that each group is taught a lesson while other students work independently (p. 13). Teachers were taking time to plan for both grade levels or to find themes across the curricula for core subjects and teach the two during math class due to the differences in standards. Miller (1989) also found that math and ELA were being taught in groups, so teachers had the ability to teach grade level standards (p. 56). Due to the prevalence of multi-age classrooms, Heather (2014) notes that schools are planning ahead and creating a curriculum specialized for multi-grade classrooms in order to facilitate grade level standards (p. 16). Schools in the United States are not only aware of the multi-age classrooms but are also making an effort to

align and find common themes across grade levels in order to teach more efficiently in a multi-grade classroom.

Conclusion

Educational initiatives and reforms have made multi-age classrooms more common in today's elementary schools with widely varying claims about the model's effectiveness in serving the needs of students. Multi-age classrooms that originated as a means to solve the problems of smaller class size enrollments and limited school budgets have increasingly been looked at more positively, as a way to cater to student's academic and social-emotional needs and differentiate curriculum more effectively. Research supporting combination classrooms draws from Vygotsky's Social Development Theory and argues that having a mixed- age group can be developmentally supportive for students because of the diverse interactions among students (Bekiryazıcı, 2005, p.914). Students are learning through social interactions, and in turn, are developing cognitively through these interactions. Some studies have also found that students in combination classrooms are higher achieving. Researchers have stated that teachers in this position are using a variety of strategies to teach the diverse population such as the differentiation model and thematic instruction. Due to the need to differentiate, teachers utilize more instructional methods that may not occur in straight grade classrooms.

While higher achieving results could be a positive effect of instructional methods that are used in the classroom, negative perspectives such as assigning students that are higher achieving to begin with, has been a concern. With limited funding, schools have been forced to have multi-age classrooms to support the population at their schools. Negative perceptions about multi-age classrooms include the concerns that some students will be left

behind, specifically those from higher grade levels whose skills will suffer as a result of the mixed classroom environment and curriculum. Parents are concerned that their student will not be challenged in a combination class due to differences in grade levels and curricula. Similarly, teachers are stressed about teaching to two grade levels and have concerns about the time constraints that they face daily with teaching and planning for both grade levels. Instead, teachers use a variety of teaching methods to support all learners in the class. Historically, multi-age classrooms resulted from reforms that were put in place but continued to popularize due to its cost saving elements. As a consequence, stakeholders of combination classrooms fear that students will not acquire an adequate education. Nevertheless, teachers are using a variety of teaching instructions to support their classroom of diverse learners.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The study sought to explore how teachers and students experienced combination classrooms and the impact of using accelerated curriculum in a multi-age classroom. The purpose of this study was to answer the following questions:

1. How do fourth grade students experience learning in a multi- grade class as compared to students not in a multi-grade class?

2. How do teachers experience teaching a multi-grade class?

3. What is the impact of using an accelerated curriculum on learners in a multi-age class?

This chapter is organized into different segments beginning with: (a) the school context of Lincoln Elementary and its participants; (b) the rationale for the methodology of the study and its instruments; (C) the data analysis used to inform the study about teacher and student experiences in a multi-age classrooms and the possible effects of using accelerated curriculum during English Language Arts (ELA)

School Context

Lincoln Elementary is the only K-8 school located in Lincoln City in rural Northern California. Populated by about 1,900, Lincoln City is situated about 10 miles from a large regional university town where farming is predominant and where demographically, there is a Latino majority. Based on the School Accountability Report Card (SARC), 93% of students are Hispanic and it was the school's first year implementing the Dual- Immersion program (SARC, 2018, p. 2). During the study Lincoln Elementary serviced approximately

400 students with two classes at each grade level. Two teachers were assigned for each grade level. However, three teachers facilitate three kindergarten classrooms and three teachers alternated grades in fourth and fifth grade depending on the student enrollment.

Role of Researcher

As a first year teacher, I taught a fourth and fifth grade multi-grade class, while the site had another teacher teaching a straight fifth grade class and another teacher teaching a straight fourth grade class. At Lincoln Elementary the population of students in fourth and fifth have resulted in straight grade level classes or multi-age classes from year to year. While this became my first teaching assignment, I was also pursuing my Master's in Curriculum and Instruction in Education, and started at the New Teacher Center program to clear my credential. Since I was overwhelmed with my duties, the study became part of my teacher action research to determine how to better facilitate my students in a multi-age classroom. Prior to the beginning of the year, I aligned all the standards for all subjects to identify the differences in subjects by grade level. I found that the ELA curriculum was, for the most part, similar in fourth and fifth grade with an exception of few standards. Unfortunately, I did not have the same results for other subject areas as they differed greatly such as math and social studies. For this reason, I used my best judgement as an educator and chose to only teach the fifth grade curriculum in a fourth and fifth grade class during ELA. The ELA curriculum thus became what I term an accelerated curriculum for the fourth grade students in the combination classroom.

Participants

The groups used in the study consisted of a variety of stakeholders of this class model including the two grade levels in a multi-age classroom and students not in a multi-age

classroom. With parental consent, current fifth and sixth grade 10 to 11 year old Latino students were interviewed about their class experience in my multi-age classroom the year prior. The students from my combination classroom were not pre-selected or tracked in creating the population for this class. Although gender in each class was distributed evenly, the counselor at the school did choose students for the combination classroom based on social emotional needs that would be supported in a class environment best suited for their needs. To add, a letter of approval was received from the site principal to conduct the interviews with the students in order to gain insight on student perspectives about their experiences in a combination classroom.

Using 14 predetermined open-ended questions, student group interviews were conducted separately by grade level. All the interviews took place after school in my classroom while we sat around a round table to allow us to listen to each other. All the grade levels were interviewed together in order to elaborate on their responses based on their perspectives. I selected three fifth grade students that were in my combination class the year prior and were in my class during the study. Three sixth graders who were in my combination classroom last year were also interviewed together. Lastly, two of my current fifth grade students who were in a straight fourth grade class were interviewed in order to obtain their perspectives about not being in a multi-age classroom at this age and what their perspectives were the year prior. All the teachers and students were given pseudonyms for confidentiality purposes.

Since teachers have been core contributors to this class model, it was important to obtain insight about their experiences in a combination classroom. The teacher interviews were conducted separately and independently to ensure that they did not feel concerned about

speaking honestly. Both of these five to 15 year experienced teachers had combination classrooms in the past. Additionally, I had worked with both of these teachers previously and both were my mentors while clearing my credential, ensuring that these teachers felt secure to speak their minds without judgement. The teachers were given a choice of when they could do the interviews. One teacher decided to respond to the open-ended questions through a Google document that was then shared with me. The other interview was conducted in her classroom after school.

This study used mixed methods including qualitative and quantitative analysis. The qualitative data for the study consisted of fourth and fifth grade multi-age student interviews, students not in a multi-age classroom, and two teacher interviews. Using grounded-theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 5), the interviews were conducted, transcribed, and coded. The emerging codes were then presented through memos. Additionally, quantitative data was gathered to measure growth in reading at the end of the year using district wide benchmark scores (Renaissance STAR Reading).

Rationale for Qualitative Data

Qualitative data methods used in research were intended to collect, "open-ended, emerging data that is then used to develop themes" (Campbell, 2014, p. 1). Since this study was intended to gather interviews using open-ended questions to obtain emerging codes, the data collected was categorized as qualitative data. Interviews in this qualitative method included group interviews in order to serve as the major data source for this study. Before the interview, three current fifth graders answered a Google form survey that consisted of six questions about their experiences and initial thoughts about being in a combination class. The purpose of the form was to acquire thoughts and comments before we interviewed as a group

just in case their peers influenced their responses since qualitative data seeks, "Perspectives on experience [that] can change from person to person, yet it is perspective that influences social cognition and social behavior" (Jackson et al., 2007, p. 27). To obtain different perspectives about this class model, two experienced teachers were also interviewed. Using grounded theory and its coding process, emerging themes were identified using both student and teacher interview responses. Through coding, I identified how students in a combination class experienced learning in this environment. Similarly, I was able to understand how teachers felt about planning, teaching, and preparing for a multi-grade classrooms. The qualitative method of using interviews helped me refer back to the responses as many times as needed where I was able to identify the natural emerging themes based on the their responses.

Grounded Theory

For the purpose of this study, Corbin and Strauss' 1967 grounded theory method was utilized to understand teacher and student experiences from interview responses about multi-age classrooms. Grounded theory was selected because it was "designed to develop a well integrated set of concepts that provide a thorough theoretical explanation of social phenomena under study (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 5). Since I was interviewing various groups of students and teachers, this method allowed me to find codes that directly discussed the experiences of both students and teachers in a multi-age classrooms. After data was collected, I formulated open codes. Open codes were determined by examining commonalities between the teacher and student responses. After reviewing the main themes of the interviews and how they pertained to multi-age classrooms, I was able to come up with the axial codes based on the open codes presented. Some of the codes that emerged from the

first pass were: time constraints; academic performance; math separated by grade level; academics; stress; groups; differentiation; managing curricula; and teaching curricula. From those open codes, axial codes were derived by identifying which ones were discussed mostly by students and teachers. Following this, selective codes were further established by using the amount of times students and teachers referred to an axial code. Table 2 in Chapter 4 gives a more specific recount of the open, axial, and selective codes that emerged from the interviews.

<u>Interview Instrument</u>

All the interviews were recorded on an audio recorder using a Windows computer application along with Google software speech to text to transcribe and analyze responses. The first interview was transcribed by hand and the rest of the interviews used Google software speech to text while audiotaping the interview. This gave me the opportunity to go back with a second pass which provided context to what my students and colleagues were expressing. The interviews consisted of:

- Three fifth grade students,

- Three sixth grade students,

- Two fifth graders (who were in a straight fourth grade class), and

- Two teachers who have taught combination classes.

The online Google form that consisted of six questions was given before the interview earlier that day to allow students to feel comfortable to answer as honestly as possible, since their peers could hinder their opinion during the group interview. The students were given as much time as needed to complete the Google form. After the Google form was submitted, the open- ended questions were used for the interview. The open-ended questions

were conducted in a audiotaped group interview that allowed students to feel more comfortable. This also permitted them to recall their memories by using each other's experiences from the past year.

Student interviews were conducted after school in the classroom. I gave them a brief overview to remind them of the purpose of the interview. Expectations were also set in place which allowed us to listen to each other. Since I had these students the year prior, a strong relationship of trust and rapport was already established. However, I worried that their answers would deviate from the truth because they would not want to disappoint their teacher. I decided to include students that were in the straight grade class that provided additional insight about multi-grade classrooms. Additional questions were asked so students could elaborate on their responses.

Sample Student interview questions:

1. Did you like about being in a combination classroom? Why or why not?

2. Did you like that we were doing fifth grade curriculum for ELA?

3. How did you feel at the end of the year?

4. What do you think about students being in a combination classroom?

5. Would you be in a combo class again?

(For full interview protocol see Appendix A)

The interviews with the educators gave insight about the different factors that influenced their daily tasks teaching in a multi-age class. I used the Google speech to text software, when I interviewed, the audio recorder, and then transcribed. The interviews lasted about 20 minutes each, with 12 predetermined questions that were discussed during the interview. Below were some questions used for the teacher interview:

1.   Do you like teaching a combination class? Why or why not?

2.   How do you set up your time during ELA?

3.   Why do you think we have combination classrooms?

4.   How do parents react to the placement of their child in a combination

classroom?

5.   How do these students compare academically?

(For full interview protocol see Appendix A)

Rationale for Quantitative Data

The established assessment at our school site was used in the study to track

student progress at the district level at Lincoln Elementary. Renaissance STAR Reading was

used since it was a monthly K-8 computerized assessment administered in the classroom.

Quantitative data allowed for a comparison of data samples that measured academic abilities

after students attended a multi-age classroom. I wanted to use the Renaissance STAR

Reading scores since it measured class growth from the beginning to end of the year. Since

these scores were based on reading scores I wanted to understand if using accelerated

curriculum could be beneficial for a combination classroom.

Renaissance STAR Reading Instrument

This online test was administered to students in both reading and math. This was a

district wide assessment that was taken monthly to track student academic growth and

progress. At the end of the test, students were compared to grade level standards in ELA and

math based on their performance. For this study, I used the student's scaled score to track

their yearly progress. A scaled score is a score the testee receives and is then converted to fit

a standardized scale. Each student had a beginning of the year and end of the year scaled

score. It then showed how much they had improved, stayed steady, or declined in reading.

An overall class scaled score was used to analyze the yearly progress between the straight

fifth grade class, the straight fourth grade class, and the fourth and fifth grade combination

class at the site. The beginning of the year class scaled score and the end of the year scaled

score were measured to determine the growth of each class in reading. The two scores

(beginning and end of the year scaled scores) were subtracted. The data in Figure 2 indicate

how much each class grew within that year.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data was collected, transcribed, and analyzed in order to obtain the

following codes:

1. Time Constraints

2. Curriculum

3. Separation

The themes naturally emerged from both student and teacher responses from the

interviews and its analysis. In addition, class community was talked about by both grade

levels which was not a theme that emerged in teacher responses but important to note by

students in a combination class. Students and teachers had similar perceptions about topics in

a multi-age classroom. All the sample groups did mention the division and separation that

occurred with this class model. Using assessments that were prevalent at our school site, I

obtained last year's scores to compare between multi-age classrooms and straight grade

classrooms to measure the impact of using accelerated curriculum in a multi-age classroom.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

To better facilitate a multi-grade classroom, the main purpose of this study was to answer the following questions:

1. How do fourth grade students experience learning in a multi- grade class as compared to students not in a multi-grade class?

2. How do teachers experience teaching a multi-grade class?

3. What is the impact of using an accelerated curriculum on learners in a multi-age class?

The findings were developed using grounded theory and analyzing quantitative student assessment data. This chapter is divided into two section to provide an overview of the qualitative and quantitative data findings. Part one provides the findings of the qualitative data while the second part focuses on the findings of quantitative data.

Part I: Qualitative Data

Interviews

The interviews allowed me to understand aspects of my student's experience beyond what I had known from teaching a multi-grade class. Since I had prior relationships with the interviewees, the interviews became more conversational and open ended, revealing additional topics beyond the interview questions. This gave the interviewees the freedom to speak their mind and move beyond any limitations they might have felt by the phrasing of the questions. Table 1 below shows the coding process from triangulating themes that emerged from the two grade level students and teachers. Table 2 below shows how many times each

theme was talked about during student and teacher interviews in order to come up with the

three major theme. The three themes that emerged were: time constraints, curriculum, and

separation.

Table 1

Codes

Open Codes	Axial Codes	Selective Codes

● Accelerated curriculum
● Math class was separated
   by grade levels
● Stress
	● Curriculum led to
	   separation of grade levels
	   in certain subjects causing
	   stress on both the teachers
	   and students
		● Time constraints
		● Curriculum
		● Separation

● Time Constraints	● 2 Curriculum ● Stress ● Planning	
● Separation	● Separation of grade level ● Separation of subjects ● Grouping of subjects	
● Academics Performance	● Result in placement of combo ● Separation of class	
● Stress	● Time constraints ● Curricula ● Varied Levels	

Time Constraints

The issue of time was a factor for both teachers and students of multi-grade classes. When

asked about multi-age classrooms, I assumed that teachers might have more concerns about

time constraints than students, given they are the ones designing the instructional time for

Table 2

Determining Selective Code

Axial Codes	Student Response	Teacher Response	Total
1.Academics	·		1
2. Time Constraints	· · · · ·	· · · · ·	10
3. Separation	· · · ·	· ·	6
4. Stress		· · ·	3
5. Groups		· · · · · · · ·	8
6. Differentiation		·	1
7. Curriculum	· · · ·	· · · · · · ·	11

two age groups of students. However, surprisingly students, themselves, noted that they

observed concerns about time in the combination classroom. Students were very aware of the

teacher stress about time constraints. This may have been especially true during math time, as

this was the block I decided to differentiate by grade level because standards were so

different. Although I was clear with my students about why I needed additional time to finish

with a group or finish the same rotations the following day, this was clearly something they

noticed and remembered in reflecting on their experiences in the combo classroom.

Both fifth and sixth graders did not like combination classrooms when asked

about this during math time. When asked about what they did not like about being in

combination classrooms, Daniel a 6th grader, remembers having to be in different groups

when I was working in small group with other grade levels. Similarly, Claudia recalls small

groups during math and having to spend half of the time with each grade level. They

responded with the following:

Daniel: cause you would have to be different places and then it took a while to get the work done.

Claudia: yea because you would spend half of the time doing it with the fifth graders and fourth graders.

Math was repeatedly mentioned as a time of the day that students did not enjoy often because they had to move to different places around the room and be regrouped with their same grade peers. While I worked with one grade level, the other grade level in the classroom would work on an independent or group task with their grade. When I was done teaching, I would have the students switch so I would get to teach the other group. During these times students were split by either fourth or fifth grade groups instead of ability groups since the standards were very different. When I asked what they thought about teachers enjoyment of combination classrooms, the students expressed how they thought that teachers would find this work more difficult and continued to mention the time constraints of having to split the class to be able to teach the two grade levels.

Bella: Harder.

Claudia: Harder.

Claudia: because you had to spend half time fourth graders and half time fifth.

In Mason and Burns' (1995) *Teachers' Views on Combination Classrooms,* teachers elaborated that a concern about this class composition was having limited time for instruction, narrowing the focus on the core subjects. However, it was important to note that this was a topic that would more likely come from a teacher expressing their experiences rather than a student elaborating on their experiences in a multi-grade classroom. It was effortless for students in one group or the other to do a quick independent task to allow me to work with other students.

Curriculum

A common concern from parents with multi-grade classrooms is the teacher's inability to teach two grade levels effectively. Similarly, some teachers echoed these concerns when they discussed feeling pressured to teach all subjects to two grade levels. In the following excerpt, I asked Mrs. Dale, a 15 year old experienced teacher who taught a second and third grade multi-age class, how parents were reassured about the curriculum used in the classroom when parents were concerned about their child in a combination classroom and their academics.

> Mrs. Dale: The fourth grade parents were upset students were being put in a combo class with third graders. Parents were not happy. They felt that their child wouldn't get the education they should get, which they do have a point. They were reassured we are teaching their children the content they need to know. They just don't understand we split every content area in half to teach the content to both grades, so it takes longer in our scope and sequence to teach concepts.

Mrs. Dale expressed that there were parental concerns from the very beginning. The teachers not only felt pressured to teach multiple subjects a day to multiple grades in the classroom, but also felt ill-equipped to assure parents about sufficient instruction in a multi-grade classroom. Song (2009) argues that almost 50% of parents surveyed had concerns about combination classes due to a preconception that teachers would only teach to the younger grade level in the class. Even though state curriculum contains a scope and sequence, it is not always possible for a teacher to stay on track because they constantly have to balance curricula for multiple subjects.

Additionally, a theme that was apparent in the interviews but was not expressed as much as other themes, was that of stress. Teachers felt stressed having to plan for curricula across all subjects and for two grade levels each day as well as having to reassure parents that

their child would be challenged in these classrooms. The added pressure led to teachers

feeling even more stressed.

> Mrs. Richer: To begin with, I don't think it does a service for our students. I know in a regular classroom, we have a wide variety of learning levels but then you also have 2 grade level curriculum you have to try to teach to both groups of students. It makes stress levels go up, some students or grade levels can't work independently, and we don't have any extra support from aids with special needs populations or help from parents willing to come in and run a group...it's a lot more work especially like the second and third grade and even kindergarten / first grade they're so different both kindergarten and first grade. They are so different.

> Mrs. Dale: Yes, this position of having a combination class is stressful. Not only do we need to prepare for multiple content areas, we need to prepare for different grade levels. In math, science, and social studies, these are completely different standards. Before combination classes, we are at school for long hours, getting prepped, grading papers, etc. and still go home to our families to have our home life.

To alleviate the stress, Mrs. Richer, a fifth year teacher who has had a third and

fourth grade combination class, used accelerated curriculum in her class since the standards

were similar. However, Mrs. Dale had a harder time doing so, since the grade level readiness

was different for her second and third graders. She said that she could not use one curriculum

for a combination classroom since some students were still developing beginning literacy

skills, while the other half of her class had reading levels that were more developed:

> Mrs. Richer: Students are being taught up in curriculum for ELA so it will be repeated the next year, which may be repetitive. Also, teaching third and fourth grade science in an hr for example is difficult. It's pretty much half an hour for both instead of an hour for the day and then you have to find something that is review or branching off what they just learned to do independently.

> Mrs. Dale: both kindergarten and first grade are completely different and then second and third in math it was completely different the reading we, we try to combine both...but when you have students in second grade who still can't read it makes it hard for you to teach the third grade curriculum and try to push them up. We have a lot of struggling learners/ readers, so it makes it really really hard.

From a student's perspective, there were mixed feelings about having accelerated

curriculum. The upper grade enjoyed the fact that all students were using one curriculum but

the lower grade felt that it was difficult. Claudia and Bella were students from the lower grade who thought the curricula was difficult and did not enjoy having it again when they arrived to fifth grade.

> Claudia: Kind of, cause sometimes I didn't understand that stuff and I was like is that fifth grade stuff, benchmark?

> Eliseo: I felt like I um I didn't really, what I mean [is] I didn't really notice.

> Bella: It was way too hard.

> Eliseo: I didn't really like it because it felt like pretty much [we] have to do it over again, having to start all over.

> Bella: Like we got held back.

For the most part, student attitudes towards having accelerated curricula or repeated curricula was negative. One student did mention that he did not realize he was doing fifth grade curriculum. As mentioned above, one student did say that she felt like she was, "held back" since she had the same curriculum. Lynn, a student from the fourth straight grade classroom with multi-grade experiences from the past, mentioned the worry of not getting enough assistance from the teacher since they would have to teach two grade levels.

> Lynn: Well a negative thing is that the teacher wouldn't pay too much attention on you she wouldn't have too much attention, she would need to just teach two grade levels to certain grade levels.

Mrs. Dale also expressed that she would have to teach whole class first and how she tried to use accelerated curriculum for the whole class but then had to spend more time using small groups. Overall, she felt that with her grade level she could not use accelerated curriculum due to the lack of literacy in the grade levels in her class:

> Mrs. Dale: I start the whole class lesson, we do the same lesson because there's no way that I have enough time to do both especially not with Benchmark Advance they they expect a lot of the kids so I tried to teach up but then I had to spend more time on the small group part because I had to go back and forth.

To avoid time constraints with the curriculum many teachers used different methods in their classroom to facilitate the two grade levels. In this case, independence played a major factor in a multi-grade classroom. Mason and Burns (1995) explained that many teachers in this position preferred using the mixed grouping strategy to teach their students. Like the teachers above, the mixed grouping strategy allowed them to work with the two grade levels during class without giving up a grade level curriculum. However, they also mention that this is difficult and inefficient if students cannot work independently. In my point of view, working with groups was the most efficient way to manage the classroom.

Grade Separation During Math Time

Grade separation was a factor for teachers as they spoke about the need to group students based on grade level to teach other subjects. Here, Mrs. Dale speaks about her experiences with multi-grade classrooms and having to teach multiple subjects.

> Mrs. Dale: So the main lesson I've tried to do whole class but I had to do centers and even with math have them split every time… history is different what you're teaching both science is different so I everything had to split.

Similarly, students felt that having two separate groups made the class more difficult. Below their responses expressed how they constantly had to move around during class when they needed to work in groups in order for me to teach them their curriculum. Again, Bella mentioned how math was the most prominent subject area where they were having to move, and they felt separated. Perhaps it was more evident to them that they were being grouped and referred to by their grade level during math because grade level rotations were necessary and crucial for math to function. When I asked the sixth graders what they did not like about combination classrooms, they responded with their experiences during math in the conversation and their perspectives were negative. When I asked the fifth graders

if they felt that it was easier being in my class again after having me a second year, they

ended up referring back to the math hour where they were separated.

> Daniel: How you, like, how Emily said how you would have to go from fifth grader than to fourth graders and back and forth.

> Emily: I don't want to be separated from the other class.

> Bella: the worst thing that you ever done was math... because I didn't like, we always had to switch and stuff.

> Claudia: yea because you would spend half of the time doing it with the fifth graders and fourth graders.

After having these experiences, Emily mentioned how she would not want to be

in another multi-age class since she would not want to go through a divide once again in her

grade level. Math continued to be a theme as I interviewed the students. Many of them held a

negative perspective about math time. I believe that this was because of the constant division

of the grade levels during this time. The groups were created based on grade level abilities in

order to do "M.A.T.H.: Meet with teacher, At your seat work, Technology, Hands on." I

would work with a grade level during "Meet with teacher" which was crucial to have

uninterrupted time, to be able to teach the daily lesson. I felt pressured to teach the lesson to

each grade level and ensure that they got enough practice. The language and labeling of these

groups that was used during this time could have also been discounting to them leaving them

with a negative experience. Instead of referring to these groups during math as something

else rather than their grade level could have made a difference about how they felt about this

time. I referred to them as "fourth" or "fifth" graders and I believe that this impacted their

perception about this time negatively because they were not seen as a whole group class,

instead they were separated grade level.

<u>Classroom Community</u>

Even though classroom community was not a theme that emerged directly through the coding process, the importance of building a strong class community was evident in student interviews. It is also a strong component of Vygotsky's Social Development Theory (1978) . At the beginning of the year, it was important to set rules and expectations in order for this to occur. Students spent the first weeks of school getting to know one another and practicing the routines of the classroom, which included working in small groups and troubleshooting depending on one another if they needed assistance. They understood that when working independently, they had the option of asking their classmates unless there was an emergency. I also allowed these students to get to know me on a personal level, in which, I believe allowed them to sense my frustrations and stress when I was short on time. By creating a safe environment in the classroom for my students, it was easy for me to talk about the reality of the classroom situations when teaching. Students may have had negative perspectives about math time because there was a sense of breach in the unified classroom feeling. During this time, they were no longer referred to as the "Monopoly Class" but instead the "fourth graders" or "fifth graders". At the beginning of the year, the Monopoly theme classroom I had created to build community within the class was set aside during this time with the language and grouping that was used during other subjects like math, where fourth and fifth grade standards did not mirror one another. During math time, in order to teach both grade levels their appropriate standards, I had to separate the class by grade level. This could have been even more prominent with the fourth graders because they felt that they could be grouped with fifth graders and not be referred to by their grade level for once in their elementary experience. Overall, the class had built a close relationship and community,

so they perceived their classroom as one. So, when students were separated by grade level within their class, I believe that they could sense a disconnect to the environment we had built.

At our school we also had events that we did as a grade level such as the Multicultural Festival and the Winter Program. This was harder to plan because I would have to either plan with the fourth grade teacher on a time and day for all the fourth graders to practice and do the same for the fifth graders or have the class perform together. Due to my schedule as a first year teacher, I decided to perform as a class, especially since we had already built a community within the class. There were times when students would be vocal about not getting the opportunity to perform with the other classes. When I asked the sixth grade students if they liked doing these events with their class or if they would have rather have done it with their grade level they all said that they, "liked it" when we did it as a class rather than by grade level. Nicolasa, a sixth grader, then added that she did not have a preference but liked when we were able to perform as a class. Their responses had an overall positive outlook on performing as a class rather than as a grade level.

Daniel: I like I didn't mind.

Nicolasa : I liked it.

Emily: I liked it.

Nicolasa: I mean I didn't really care that we did it all together but I liked it when we did it as a class.

Lynn, a fourth grader from the straight fourth grade class did mention that she did not get the chance to meet with friends that she usually would have gotten to perform with during these events. It was interesting to obtain these other perspectives from a student from

a straight grade class. It was easier to see what straight grade students experienced as compared to the multi-age students during these events.

> Lynn: so it was like basically you know which class was which because it was separated we don't have the dance together so it was kind of like you didn't see your friends.

While, it was often necessary that multi-age classrooms had to be separated by grade level to make the schedule work, it was not the student's preference However, overall students in a multi-age classroom preferred doing class events as a class rather than grade level. When I asked the fifth graders if they had anything to add, they mentioned their classroom theme and if we could do a chant at the end of the day like we did the year before but with our current, Jurassic Park theme.

Eliseo: I forgot to mention remember the Mo-Mo-Monopoly thing?

Mrs. Godinez: Oh yea!

Claudia and Bella: Yea.

Bella: Can we do like a Jurassic version?

While community in the classroom was not brought up in the teacher interviews, it was a factor that contributed to their positive experiences in a combination classroom. Students not only expressed how they preferred to participate in school events as a class, but they also remembered having a class where they could socialize with their peers and learn from each other despite their ages or grade levels.

Vygotsky's (1978) Social Development Theory is evident in multi-grade classrooms where students have learned through social interactions and students have built relationships and community in the classroom despite the differences in ages and grade levels. As mentioned, classroom community was brought up by both grade levels in the

combination classroom. Community was a core value for students and influenced how they talked about their experiences in the classroom. Given I worked hard to build a community in the class, it was interesting to see how students perceived time constraints as connected to being separated or segregated from one another by grade level.

Additionally, parents were concerned about this multi-age classroom at the beginning of the year. The same concerns that Song (2009) found were evident at the beginning of the year where upper grade level parents were concerned about their student being taught their appropriate grade level curriculum. At the beginning of the year a fifth grade parent expressed her concerns with the curricula in a combination classroom. Half way through the year, she expressed how content her daughter was and the self-confidence she had attained. Being the upper grade in the classroom allowed this student to gain self-confidence as Moller and Hightower (2008) had expressed in her study and the social emotional skills that students could gain from a multi-grade class.

Part 2: Quantitative Data

Renaissance STAR Reading

I used STAR Reading, a district-wide reading benchmark assessment, because I was interested in seeing students reading growth following my use of the fifth grade ELA curriculum. Before I taught the ELA curriculum, I looked at both fourth and fifth grade standards and found that the ELA standards were similar across grade levels. I then made the decision to teach the fourth grade students, fifth grade curriculum and differentiate instruction when needed. In order to compare multi-age and straight grade classrooms, the beginning of the year scores were taken from each class. This helped me understand where each class stood in regards to academic standing at the beginning of the year. Figure 2
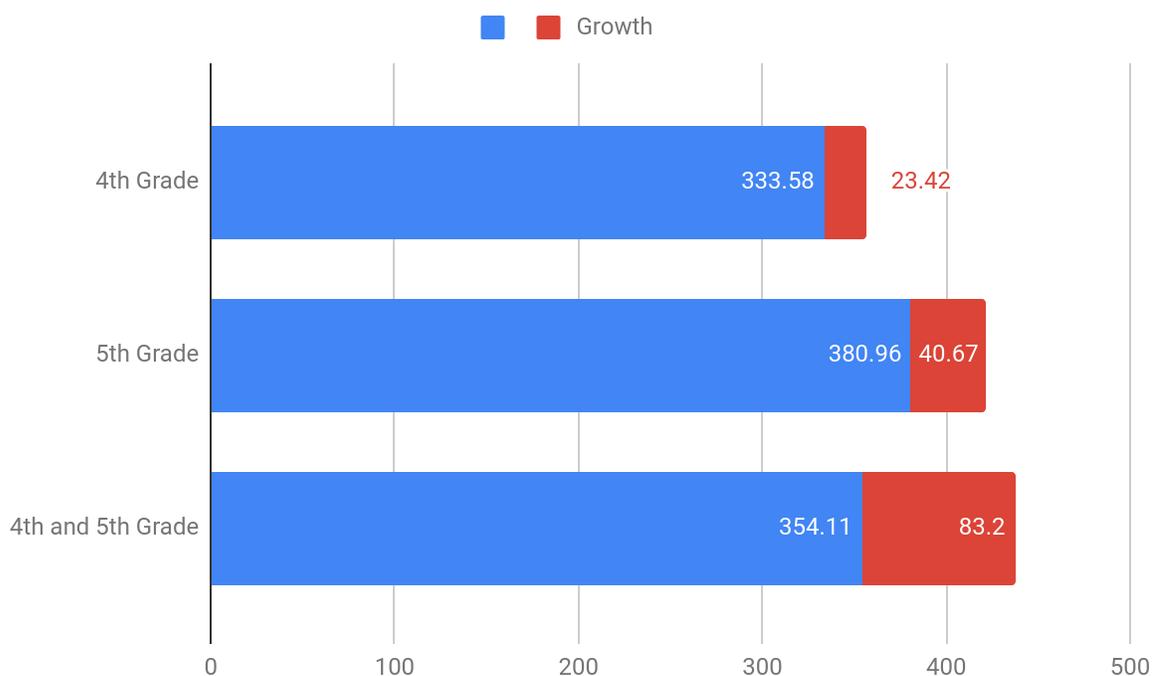
Figure 2. Beginning of the year scaled scores and end of the year scaled scores.

displays the students' scores by class based on beginning year scaled scores. The scaled

scores were used to measure growth in reading for each student and then combined to get an

overall scaled score growth average for the class. The growth report was derived from the

online assessment program, Renaissance STAR Reading, and was printed out for each class.

A spreadsheet was created with each student's beginning of the year and end of the year

scaled scores which were then used to create Figure 3 to give a visual of student growth.

Additionally, Figures 3 and 4 were used to measure the percentage of students of

each class that were at each scaled score range at the beginning and end of the year. Based

on the Renaissance STAR Reading data, the combination classroom was academically

performing better at the beginning of the year as compared to the other straight grade
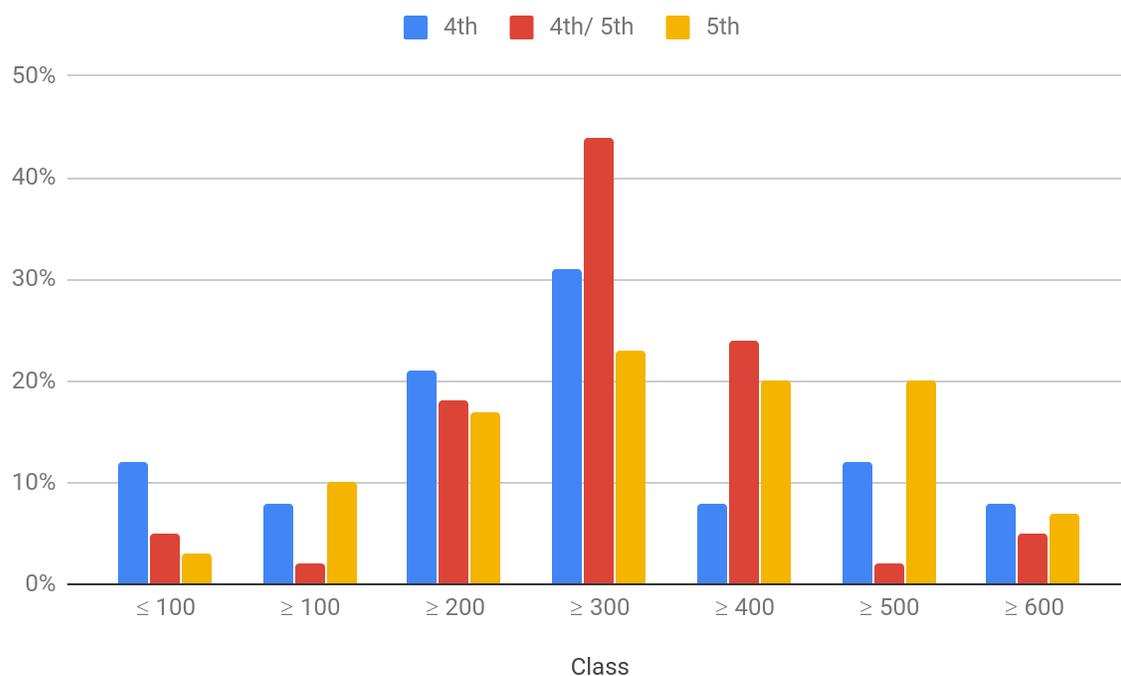
Figure 3. Beginning of the year scaled score percentage of students in a class.

classrooms. This aligns with Mason and Burns' (2002) argument about higher ability students being placed in multi-grade classes.

I was also part of the process of selecting students, which allowed me insight into the students that would be coming into the classroom. While some of the students selected for the combination class may have been academically stronger, I emphasized that I wanted students of all abilities to ensure that the classroom was equitable and representative of the students at our school. I also mentioned that I wanted students who were in special education in order to ensure that everyone had access to this type of classroom. From there, gender was distributed equally among classes. The school counselor also provided her own experience working with these students and used her best judgement in placing students in my classroom given their emotional needs and the class environment.
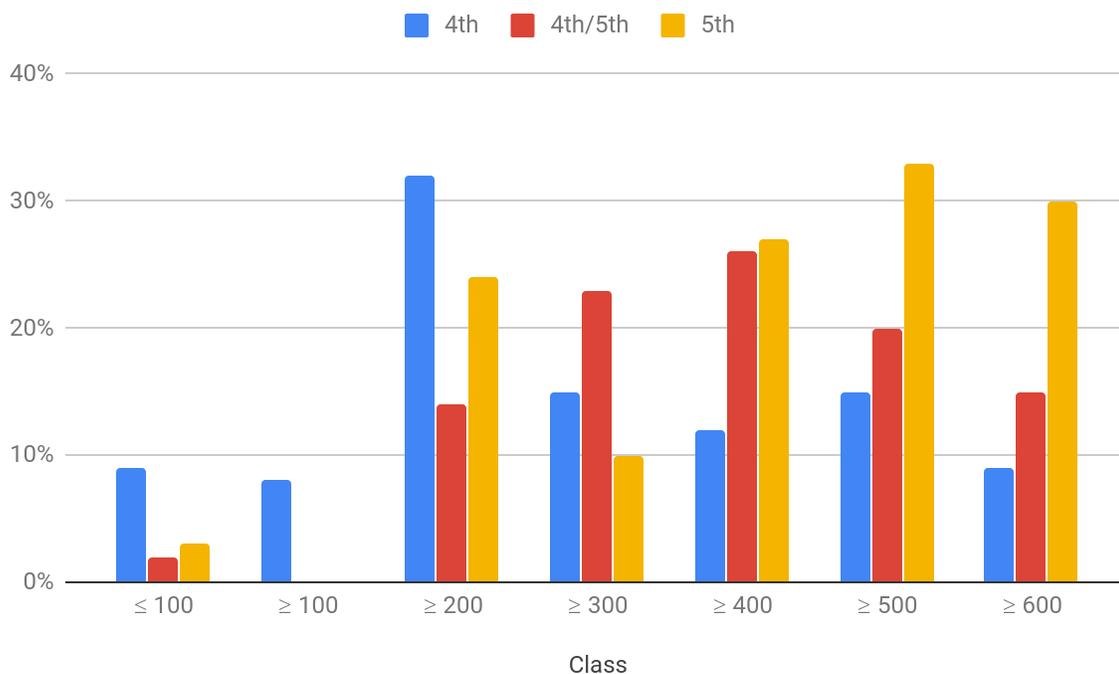
Figure 4. End of the year scaled score percentage of students in a class.

At the end of the year, the fourth grade classroom had a scaled score growth of 23. Meanwhile, the fifth grade classroom had an end of the year scale score growth of 43. The mix-age classroom on the other hand, had an end of the year scale score growth of 83. Not only was that double the fifth grade classroom but almost four times as much as the fourth grade class. Some of the possible reasons for this dramatic increase could be higher academic achievement of students at the beginning of the school year, but also the community that we created in the classroom. This made it a safe environment for students to learn in and possibly take risks given the accelerated curriculum that was used with the fourth graders. If these multiple factors hold true, moving forward in the future, teachers of a combination class could use one curriculum to teach ELA if the grade levels in the classroom are similar in standards.

Unrath (1999) argues that experienced teachers are a better fit for this assignment because of their experiences with curriculum and differentiation strategies. However, many times newer teachers are given this assignment because it is less likely that new teachers would resist since they are not tenured. Having an experienced teacher in this position would better facilitate the curriculum and bridge two grade levels together in a more efficient way such as using their best judgement to use accelerated curriculum. Despite being a first year teacher, having worked with multiple curriculums from a different state during my teacher preparation program and pursuing my Master's in Curriculum and Instruction, it was helpful to make a decision about using accelerated ELA curriculum.

Both fourth and fifth graders in the combination classroom had better scores in the district benchmark. However, it is important to note that while they did better, for the most part there was not a huge gap between the scaled scores of the two classes. This could also be a result of using accelerated curriculum in the combination classroom. It does demonstrate that the students in the multi-grade class did not suffer academically and were able to keep up with their peers which has always been a concern in a multi-grade classroom.

Discussion

As Mulryan-Kyne (2007) argued, multi-age classroom compositions can be more popular in rural schools such as Lincoln Elementary. Teachers and students both agreed that due to lower student numbers in each grade, the school is forced to assign combination classrooms at Lincoln Elementary. For the past three years that I have been at this school site, multi-grade classes have been common. Even though Aina (2001) mentioned that Horace Mann originated this idea, it has become a staple in American public education. Teachers and students feel that combination classrooms continue to face challenges with curriculum and

time constraints in this class model. Teachers who are more experienced can execute better judgment about differentiating the curriculum and understanding the application of two sets of standards. Experienced teachers also have a wider arsenal of teaching strategies to better facilitate student access to the curricula. Nevertheless, as a first year teacher, I had limited familiarity with the curriculum at the school, yet students had high academic success. Perhaps because I was able to use accelerated curriculum with the fourth graders and facilitate small groups with all of my students, they were able to practice the expectations and routines set in place at the beginning of the year, allowing me to work well with my students during ELA. Having this be the priority helped with creating an environment that welcomed learning and mistakes.

While grouping students is one strategy teachers can use, it is also important that students do not feel separated by grade level. Creating community in the classroom helped students feel connected and closer to each other. When given the opportunity at the beginning of the year, I requested all students of all levels in the classroom to avoid tracking students by ability in this class model. However, since the students in the combination classroom did better in both of the state tests, the results could be that students felt that they were in their classroom that was known for its Monopoly theme and it was a safe environment to learn. More importantly, it was a classroom where grade levels were set aside and the classroom community grew within to emphasize learning. Vygotsky (1978) states that students learn from each other and students are able to help their peers learn within their ZPD when older kids are able to facilitate younger students in their learning. The classroom environment that Olaiya (2001) states is also an indicator that looping students for a consecutive year could be beneficial to students and their learned routines and environments

that they have practiced the year prior. Students in combination classrooms are learning

valuable social skills that help support them in an optimal learning environment.

CHAPTER V

THE CONCLUSIONS AND

RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to understand how teachers and students experienced multi-grade classrooms and the ways that accelerated curriculum played a role in this classroom composition and student learning. Chapter 4 addressed the questions this study intended to answer. The first question was aimed at finding out how fourth graders experience multi-age classrooms as compared to students in a straight grade classroom. Through student interviews I was able to understand that students noticed time constraints and did not like being separated with their classmates but also that they built relationships with one another. The study also asked how teachers experienced multi-age classrooms where they discussed planning, preparing, and teaching a combination classroom as stressful and felt that time constraints were an issue, compelling them to use accelerated ELA curriculum to ease their workload. Lastly, the study was designed to answer how using accelerated curriculum in a multi-grade classroom impacted student learning. In this class, accelerated curriculum included using a 5th grade ELA curriculum for both grade levels of students. In analysis of the benchmark assessments, using accelerated curriculum with the fourth graders during ELA showed positive results, demonstrating that they were outperforming their straight grade level peers.

The study contributed to the literature regarding the importance of the teacher's role in combination classrooms. There is an ongoing difference of opinion with regard to

what makes a combination classroom academically successful (Mason and Burns, 1996); (Veenman, 1995). While both researchers focus on the student population in a multi-age classroom, teachers experiences with this class model are not studied extensively. The importance of the teacher's role in this class composition is crucial based on the teaching experiences that the teacher has acquired over the years including teaching strategies and organization of curriculum to better facilitate students in a multi-grade classroom. Most importantly, the teacher's willingness to implement a student-centered approach where students spend ample time working with peers across grade levels matters to students self-confidence and experience of the combo classroom.

Key Finding 1: Time is a Challenge in a
  Multi-grade Classroom

Teachers face time constraints in teaching multiple curricula for all subjects in a multi-age classroom. Students also perceive that time is a challenge, since teachers must teach two grade levels. Teachers feel stressed about this position because they are planning, preparing, and grading double the amount that they do in a straight grade class. Overall, students and teachers talked about experiencing stress in reflecting on their time in a combination class I Mrs. Dale mentioned that stress occurred not only from planning but all the other duties a teacher must do such as grading and preparing and still balancing her home life. She recalls working longer hours and even then, having to take work home. A surprising finding was that students also experienced stress, both in their needing to be grouped by grade level but also in observing their teacher feel stress. They spoke openly and clearly about the stress that they felt I was going through during the year. When asked if they thought I enjoyed combination classrooms they all disagreed and mentioned that it was probably a lot more work especially when teaching math. I believe that the perception of time

was stronger during math and other subjects and less during ELA time because of my need to
group students by grade level during these times

Key Finding 2: Organization of Curriculum

Due to the amount of subjects a teacher must teach, aligning as many standards
with each subject is beneficial. However, this is harder to do when teachers are in their first
years of teaching since they do not have the experience with their grade level standards or
curriculum. Experienced teachers are better in this position because they are able to align
standards between grade levels and organize their curriculum to benefit the students. In this
case, ELA was the only subject area that teachers were able to integrate because of the
similarities in grade level standards. However, this applies better to some grades because of
the grade levels and abilities of the classroom. It seems like third to fifth grade is a better fit
to integrate accelerated ELA curriculum since the standards are similar in content. Results
showed that using accelerated curriculum was an optimal in fourth and fifth grade since the
district assessment showed that students in a multi-grade classroom performed better than
students in a straight grade classroom.

Key Finding 3: Students Disliked Grade
 Level Grouping in a Multi-age
 Classrooms

It was evident that due to time constraints during times were evident during times
that I had to divide the class based on grade level standards such as math and history.
Teachers had to divide their students during class lessons to be able to teach their designated
curriculum. However, students did not enjoy feeling a division between the grade levels in
the classroom. This was even more prevalent when students had already built a community in

their classroom and did not perceive those differences but were forced to divide by grade level during math.

Key Finding 4: Classroom Environment

The quantitative data shows that students in the combination classroom did better than students in a straight grade classroom. Students thrive in an environment where structure and community are important (Olaiya, 2001). It was notable that having a classroom theme where social emotional learning was important and crucial, learning could take place because of the safe environment that was created regardless of the grade levels that were present in the classroom. Having a themed classroom also helped take away the stigmas that combination classrooms may have presented.

Recommendations

While multi-grade classrooms will likely continue to exist, further research into the organization of these classrooms is important. A multi-grade classroom may be better suited for upper elementary classrooms since there is more overlap of grade level standards, as well as the developed skills and abilities of students at these developmental stages. ELA standards are written in a way that can be easily approached by a teacher to teach one grade level in a multi-age classroom but in other subject areas it becomes harder due to the dissimilarities in standards. Perhaps multi-age classrooms should be used in grades where standards mirror each other the way ELA standards are written for fourth and fifth grade. Perhaps having more curriculum tailored to combination classrooms would be beneficial. An important aspect to consider when looking at the Common Core Standards are the variance of abilities and expectations by grade level. The wording of standards could be re-examined to fit the educational classroom demand in the United States. Using the older grade level

curriculum in a multi-age classroom, assured parents that their child would be learning grade level standards. Ultimately, students performed better in this multi-age classroom.

The qualitative data showed that students held negative perceptions about multi-age classrooms, but this led me to believe that this could be based on the language that I, and other teachers, used during subject areas where students were separated by grade level. This shows that teachers of combination classrooms should be mindful of how they group and refer to students in a multi-age classroom. Further, research could focus on the selection of students for this classroom, how many other schools in the same position are using accelerated curriculum, the grade level that they are using this with, class management philosophies in the classroom, and teacher preparation for teaching these classrooms.

Limitations of the study include an inability to access parental perceptions that changed about this class model over the course of the year. At the beginning of the year, I had trouble convincing parents that this model would work, especially for the fifth grade parents who had more concerns. I assured them about the curriculum that their students would receive and even then, parents were skeptical. Half way through the year during parent conferences, the most concerned parents expressed how their students had higher self-confidence than they had struggled to achieve the year before. Additional, research could include longitudinal studies of students in multi-grade classrooms to understand the impact on their academics are over a longer period of time. A larger sample size of students and teachers from across rural schools would also benefit this study. There are many factors that can be studied about combination classrooms. It was difficult to conclude what specific factors in multi-age classrooms are impacting academic achievement in these students.

Further research could help narrow the best approach to teaching and managing multi-grade

classrooms.

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APPENDIX A

STUDENT AND TEACHER QUESTIONNAIRE

Questions for Students:

1. How did you feel when you found out that you were going to be in a class with 5th graders?

2. Did you like being a class of 5th graders? Why or why not?

3. Did you like that we were doing 5th grade curriculum for ELA?

4. What did you like about being in class with 5th graders?

5. What did you not like?

6. Did you change your mind about being in a combination classroom halfway through the year?

7. How did you feel at the end of the year?

8. Did you feel like you learned from the 5th graders? Why or why not?

9. Did you feel like you were able to help the 5th graders in class?

10. How did you feel knowing that you were going to have me as a teacher again? Why

11. How has it been this year for you in this classroom, after having me a year previous?

12. What do you think about students being in a combination classroom?

13. Have grown?

14. Would you be in a combo class again?

Questions for Teachers

1. Do you like teaching a combination class? Why or why not?

2. What is something that has been beneficial about having a combination class?

3. What is a disadvantage?

4. Do you find that being in this position is stressful? Why or why not?

5. How do you set up your time during ELA?

6. Do you think students benefit from being in this class model?

7. Why do you think we have combination classrooms?

8. Why do you think you were put in this position?

9. Do you think students enjoy being in this type of class model?

10. What are parents reactions?

11. How do you assure parents that their students are going to be taught the same materials as other students not in combination classrooms?

12. Would you prefer a curriculum framework targeted for this class composition?

13. What did you do with your curriculum to be able to attain grade level standards in your classroom.

14. How do these students compare academically?