



Education: Words and Meanings

Multiage: Words and Meanings

Sandra Stone^a

^a**Northern Arizona University**

Dr. Sandra J. Stone is Professor Emeritus at Northern Arizona University and founder of the National Multiage Institute at NAU. Her research and publication interests include multiage education, early childhood, play, and literacy. She consults nationally and internationally. Dr. Stone has served as the Editor of the *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, and currently serves as a reviewer for several education research journals. Dr. Stone is the author of *Creating the Multiage Classroom* (2004, GoodYear Books) and co-author of *Understanding Multiage Education* (Stone/Burriss, Routledge, 2019).

Multiage – The Word

Education: Words and Meanings is designed to clarify certain words often used in educational texts. Clarifying the meanings of these words gives depth to the reader’s understanding.

The word “multiage” is a word frequently used throughout educational communities. But what does it mean? In an educational context, *multiage* is simply defined as a grouping of mixed-aged children which stay with the same teacher for several years (Stone & Burriss, 2019). However, this simple definition does not bring the depth of *meaning* necessary to understand the word *multiage*, as an educational system.

In education, multiage is a unique system of education, differing from the current graded system of education, which groups children by *same ages*, not mixed ages, whereas multiage education is designed and implemented intentionally with mixed ages, in order to create a family of learners who all benefit from a whole child learning approach. As Stone and Burriss (2019) note, “Many schools have adopted the term “multiage,” but in actuality, have not implemented a change from a graded philosophy to a multiage philosophy” (xi).

Let’s consider the graded system first, as the multiage system is in direct contrast to the predominant graded system in the United States. Multiage, as a different system of education, gives new meaning to how we educate children.

Graded System

In the late 1700s, the Industrial Revolution, first in England and then throughout Europe, led the world in engaging in a factory model of mass-producing goods. Eventually, this industrial organization was applied to how we school children. Schools, in order to reach the masses, were being designed around successful manufacturing practices (Cremin, 1957; Rippa, 1997; Robinson, 2015; Stone & Burriss, 2019). By the 1860s, in the United States, the graded system was being used by most public and private schools. Currently, the graded system is the dominant system in the United States.

Same-age groupings. Traditionally, the graded system is organized *intentionally* by age supposing that same-age children are similar and can be taught the same curriculum. Thus, in the graded system, children are grouped by the same age within a grade (i.e., Kindergarten (age 5), grade 1 (age 6), grade 2 (age 7), grade 3 (age 8), etc.). Interestingly, even though children are the same age at the beginning of the school start date, it is important to note that age within the grade may vary by 1 month to 11 months, depending on the birth day of the child.

Graded school characteristics. The graded system is defined by some of the following characteristics as addressed by Stone and Burriss (2019):

- Children may advance to the next grade level based on their performance such as meeting grade-level expectations, standards, and/or standardized tests.
- Traditionally, teachers “teach” the grade-level curriculum and/or grade-level standards from a *behaviorist* perspective, most often using lesson plans based on an objective, practice, and testing to see if the objective is met.
- Children’s performance is evaluated by meeting or not meeting the grade-level expectations or standards. If a child meets the expectations/standards, the child is promoted to the next grade level. If the child does not meet expectations/standards, the child is retained in order to repeat the grade level again.
- Letter grades, number grades, or scales (indicating if the child is meeting, not meeting, or exceeding expectations) are used to report to the child and parents (guardians) to indicate how the child is performing on the grade-level curriculum/standards.

Thus, the organization of the graded system is based on, and a remnant of, the industrial revolution, which first introduced an efficient, mechanical, factory model to manufacturing, and then, with efficiency in mind, organized schooling for children around the factory model which is currently called the graded system (Abeles, 2016; Robinson, 2015, Thompson, 2014). The purpose of the graded system is to offer an education system which moves children along a “conveyor belt” of grade-level curriculum where, if they are successful along the way, the children will be considered “educated.”

Multiage System – The Meaning

Mixed-age groupings. First, multiage is a school grouping of *mixed-aged* children, thus the name, *multi-age*. Multiage classrooms may differ from age groupings of two ages, three ages, four ages, or even more. Multiage schools do not group children by grade in school.

Typically, the ages are mixed-age groupings of young children which vary from “1) two-year groupings such as two-three-year-olds, three-four-year-olds, four-five-year-olds, and five-six-year-olds to 2) three-year groupings such as two-three-four-year-olds, three-four-five-year-olds, four-five-six-year-olds, or five-six-seven-year-olds” (Stone, 2022, p. 3). Groupings continue through various ages with older children such as eight-nine-year-olds, eight-nine-ten-year-olds, or even nine-ten-eleven-year-olds, and so on. A multiage elementary school, for example, has several groupings of mixed-ages from early childhood groupings, primary groupings, to intermediate groupings.

Multiage Characteristics. However, it is important to understand that not all mixed-aged groupings are multiage in practice. To understand the *meaning of Multiage*, it is important to consider the framework of the multiage education system which is entirely different from the graded system of education.

Multiage, as an exceptional system of education, values and supports every child, and is defined by some of the following characteristics (Stone & Burriss, 2019).

Multiage:

- Is a mixed-age family grouping, where the children stay with the same teacher for several years. For example, in a primary three-year grouping mixed-age class of potentially 24 children, the class may have eight five-year-olds, eight six-year-olds, and eight seven-year-olds, give or take. At the end of the first year, the eight-year-olds, who are now turning nine, will move on to the next multiage three-year classroom grouping with another teacher. The seven-year-olds will become the eight-year-olds, the five-year-olds will become the new six-year-olds, and a new group of five-year-olds will join the grouping. Keeping in mind the *age differences by months* for all children in the mixed-age grouping, children spend three years with the same teacher no matter their specific age by years or months.
- Uses a developmental view of learning from a *constructivist*, whole child approach, valuing the development of the whole child.
- Uses a process approach to learning, through strategies (not lesson plans) and flexible groupings based on children’s needs and interests, not by age; uses developmentally appropriate practices.
- Supports learning that is child-centered, not curriculum-centered. Each child learns at his or her own individual pace of understanding, personalizing learning for each child.
- Promotes social, cross-age learning. Multiage naturally enhances how children of different ages learn from each other, socially, emotionally, physically, and cognitively (Katz et al., 1993).
- Uses a variety of authentic assessment tools, often daily, to support and nurture each child’s growth across whole child development.
- Promotes autonomous learning by children through choice, honoring and valuing the uniqueness of each child’s development; engages mixed-ages in choice-based play, open-ended centers, and projects.
- Uses narrative reporting systems which describe the on-going growth and development of each child and identify next possible growth steps, creating a portfolio of documented growth for every child.

Since the multiage classroom does not operate under the graded system parameters, the multiage approach **does not**:

- Label or group children by age or grade.
- Promote or retain children.
- Adhere to grade-level expectations or standards.
- Use traditional letter/number grades or report cards.
- Teach the curriculum through lesson plans, rather multiage supports every child's learning development across multiple areas of the whole child, by using learning strategies.

Multiage teachers:

- Are *facilitators of learning* for every child in the mixed-age grouping, using multiage strategies to support every child's ongoing development.
- Use an integrated curriculum model, providing rich learning environments in literacy, math, science, social studies, art, music, technology, physical education, etc. where children can follow their interests, use their imaginations, invent, and create. As Pink (2009) suggests, "For artists, scientists, inventors, schoolchildren, and the rest of us, intrinsic motivation – the drive to do something because it is interesting, challenging, and absorbing – is essential for high levels of creativity" (p. 45). Multiage teachers engage in providing learning environments that benefit children of all ages.

Some of the benefits for children educated in multiage classrooms, as noted by Stone and Burriss (2019), include how mixed-age children:

- See themselves as successful learners.
- Have the "gift of time" to develop at their own pace.
- Are encouraged to follow their interests and passions.
- Become a "family of learners."
- Provide models for each other, giving temporary support by scaffolding and enhancing learning.
- Increase "cognitive conflict" by compelling each other to explain their perspectives which often results in children resolving their conflicting views.
- Engage in more and varied literacy and math experiences.
- Participate in more divergent thinking, problem-solving, and creative experiences.
- Use more advanced social skills to engage one another.
- Exhibit more prosocial behaviors such as caretaking, helping, and kindness.
- Develop long-lasting friendships among mixed-age children.
- Engage in rich, cross-age learning within the mixed-age grouping.
- Develop leadership skills.
- Learn how to socially engage one another as they work and play with each other which prepares them for their future in a mixed-age, democratic society.

Katz et al. (1993) focuses on the benefits of mixed-age schooling by stating how multiage is "intended to optimize what can be learned when children of different – as well as the same – ages and abilities have opportunity to interact" (p. 1). As Stone and Burriss (2019) suggest, "Multiage education takes the best of what we know about children and learning, and facilitates the process through a system which capitalizes on these positive attributes" (p. 41). The multiage system provides an exceptional model of education which supports the well-being of children and where mixed-age children thrive in all areas of whole child development as they engage and

learn together (Goodlad & Anderson, 1987; Gray, 2011; Stone & Burriss, 2019). Katz et al. (1993) ask, “Are children losing something valuable by having limited opportunity to interact with older and younger children?”

Precursors to the Current Multiage (mixed-ages and multiage philosophy) British Primary School

Today’s multiage education has strong philosophical roots in the British Primary Schools which were established after World War II in the mid-1940s (Rogers, 1970). During World War II, children were protected from the bombing in the cities in England by sending them to the safety of the countryside. However, when the war was over, the educators decided to provide a nurturing school environment for the children because of the emotional harm children suffered from the war. The educators invented British Primary Schools which provided mixed-age “family groupings” rather than separating children into a same-age graded system based on a factory model. The British Primary Schools provided the basis of today’s multiage education approach. A family grouping of mixed-age children stayed with the same teacher for several years where the children in family groupings were valued as human beings, not products, as often indicated in the early years of the graded system based on the factory model (Blackie, 1971; Stone, 2004, 2010).

British Primary School educators were “committed to the idea that children are the most important component, the vital raw material, of a primary school and that they are to be heard, cared for, consulted, and respected” (Rogers, 1970, p. v). Thus, the British Primary School considered the developing child, seeing each child as an individual, and supporting each child’s unique growth and development within the learning process. Educators focused on the *process of learning* rather than on the product of teaching. Within the process, mixed-age children engaged in self-directed, choice learning opportunities, where they could enjoy a sense of autonomy in an environment that provided positive affect and where their individual competency was valued (Eisner, 1974; Gray, 2014; Rogers, 1970).

Today’s multiage embraces the budding philosophy of the British Primary Schools from the 1940s. Then and now, differences in children’s ages, abilities, and interests are normal and respected and celebrated (Stone & Burriss, 2019). Eisner (1974) shares how children in the British Primary Schools were excited to go to school every day and reluctant to leave when school was over for the day. The same is true for today’s multiage children.

Non-Graded Primary and Ungraded Primary

Some schooling approaches have mixed-age groupings, use a multiage philosophy, but are called different names. Two examples are: 1) the non-graded primary, and 2) the ungraded primary. The non-graded primary and the ungraded primary are precursors to today’s multiage.

Non-graded Primary. The non-graded primary in the late 1950s and early 1960s was a schooling reform movement seeking changes to the graded system. Goodlad and Anderson (1987) proposed a nongraded approach to education instead of segregating children by age and grade. Goodlad and Anderson wanted to unshackle “educators and children from the graded system,”

believing this move would create changes away from our educational graded system of instruction (Stone & Burriss, 2019, p. 269). Just as the British Primary Schools were the beginning of the multiage movement, the non-graded primary was another pioneer in establishing the current multiage system today.

Ungraded Primary. In the 1990s, a number of states in the United States began exploring multiage education for primary classrooms. Beginning with Kentucky, its state legislature mandated ungraded primary schools throughout the state. Florida, Louisiana, and Oregon also explored ungraded primary schools, now called multiage education. However, the Standards Movement in the 2000s moved schooling more to the graded system and away from a child-centered, multiage approach. However, multiage education is still continuing to thrive in many schools throughout the United States and in other countries as well (Stone & Burriss, 2019).

Graded System Approach: Mixed-ages, but not Multiage Philosophy

Some schooling approaches have mixed-age groupings but are not multiage in philosophy. Two examples are: 1) the one-room schoolhouse, and 2) a combination class. Even though these approaches have mixed-age groupings, they fit under the graded system. The following are examples of schooling which are mixed-ages *by convenience or necessity*, but are not identified as multiage based on an understanding of the multiage philosophy of education:

One-Room School

In the early years of education throughout the United States (approximately 1800s-1900s), small, rural communities set up schools as one-room schoolhouses which contained mixed-ages, and mixed-grade children. However, mixed-ages were an act of necessity in order to educate the community's children because there were not enough children to create a graded school approach. As the graded system became more dominant in the United States in the 1860s, the one-room school, although mixed ages, were really mixed-grade which followed a curriculum-centered approach established by the graded system. Children were labeled and promoted by grade level. However, because the children were mixed ages, children often learned independently, helped each other, were able to listen in on varied lessons of the older children, and were more engaged socially. The teachers generally used a graded curriculum across varied subject areas (i.e., McGuffey Readers), and children often memorized and recited lessons (One-Room School, 2024; Stockton, 2023). Some schools offered children a rich experience, yet, in some schools, children endured strict, and/or physical punishment (Teaching in a One-Room Schoolhouse, 2018). Today, the one-room school still exists in some rural areas, although few and far between; most follow a graded approach and some are quasi-multiage in approach.

Combination Classrooms

Combination classes also contain *mixed ages*, but do not fit in the category of multiage education. Combination classes have occurred within the graded system throughout the existence of the graded system as a *necessity or convenience* rather than an intentional change in educational philosophy (Stone & Burriss, 2019).

Schools often create “combination classes,” because they don’t have enough children to create a single first grade of six-year-olds and a single second grade of seven-year-olds, so they combine two grades/ages into one class and may incorrectly call it a multiage class when in actuality the class, for example, is a combined first/second grade class, or a combined third/fourth grade class. Combination classes are often mixed-ages by necessity but are not generally multiage in philosophy.

In a combination class, teachers usually adhere to the curriculum for each grade level within the class. For example, in the area of math, a combination class teacher works with the first graders, teaching them the first-grade curriculum(standards) and then works with the second graders, teaching them the second-grade curriculum (standards), alternating time with each graded grouping during the instructional day.

Combination classrooms most often follow a graded system approach, not a multiage approach. Combination classrooms:

- Use the graded curriculum for each grade level.
- Do not integrate curriculum.
- Do not commonly promote cross-age learning through choice-based centers and projects.
- Follow the traditional graded system approach to using grades, tests, and promotion/retention procedures.

As Stone (2002) suggests, “the true multiage classroom takes down the barriers of ‘gradedness’ and seeks something different – it seeks to truly benefit children by fitting the school to their needs, instead of trying to fit the children to the school” (p. 40).

Unfortunately, a combination class, while mixed-ages, adheres to the constructs of the graded system. Stone and Burriss (2019) advise educators to “guard against using combination classrooms under the guise of multiage education” (p. 55).

Quasi-multiage Programs

Some schools may call themselves “multiage,” adhering to multiage philosophy and practices for a portion of the day, and then divide the children into same-age groupings to teach some subject areas by grade-level curriculum (i.e., reading, math). Depending on the organization of the school, a school could be considered as offering a *quasi-multiage program*, providing some multiage system philosophy components, yet also providing some graded system organization. Ultimately, these schools would not fit the definition of a true “multiage education.”

Multiage Education	Mixed Ages, but not Multiage	Graded Education
Children learn in <i>mixed-age groupings</i> under a child-centered, whole child, <i>constructivist</i> philosophy of learning, directed by learning strategies, goals, and authentic assessment based	One-room school (1800’s -) Traditional graded education but with mixed-ages/multiple grades by necessity.	Children learn in <i>same-age groupings</i> under a curriculum-centered, <i>behaviorist</i> philosophy of education, directed by lesson plans, objectives/standards, and

<p>on child development where mixed-age children are engaged with each other in self-directed, choice-based experiences through open-ended centers and projects, thus maximizing the benefits of mixed-ages learning from each other.</p>	<p>Combination Classroom (1860s -) Traditional graded education, but with two grades/ages by necessity.</p>	<p>tests where children are teacher-directed through lessons, assignments, worksheets, and often rubric-designed projects. Graded education homogenizes groupings of children by using age in grade in order to minimize differences, thus making it easier for teachers to deliver a singular, grade-level curriculum.</p>
<p>Examples: British Primary Schools (1945 -). <i>Precursor to multiage</i> Non-graded Primary Schools (1950 -). <i>Precursor to multiage</i> Ungraded Primary Schools (1990 -). <i>Precursor to multiage</i> Multiage Multiage schools/classrooms (1990 -). <i>Current</i></p>		<p>Example: Traditional Graded Schools (1860 - present)</p>

Conclusion

In our education world, words and how we use them are important. As noted, *Education: Words and Meanings* is designed to clarify certain words often used in educational texts. Clarifying the meaning of words gives the reader a greater depth of understanding and discernment. *Multiage* is a word that may be used to cover a myriad of educational groupings that may or may not exemplify the framework of multiage education and its meaning.

For example, one may hear someone sharing about a visit to a “multiage” classroom. However, upon listening to the description, the listener discerns that the classroom is not truly a multiage classroom, but rather a class of mixed ages that follows the graded system parameters. Contrasting the meaning of multiage education with the graded system broadens the meaning of both systems. Understanding words and their meanings such as “multiage” provides clarity necessary for deeper understanding.

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