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Principals' Perceptions of Changing the Age=Grade Traditional Model of Schooling

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Abstract

The traditional education system has roots in the colonial and industrial eras but the purpose of education in today's dynamic and global economy has vastly changed. Schools need to produce creative thinkers and problem solvers. This research reviewed existing literature to explore the intersections of multi-age learning, mastery learning, and blended learning in elementary schools. Centered on research questions that examined principals' perceptions of moving to a new model of elementary schooling that breaks down the barriers of age=grade (students are placed into classroom because of their age) traditional schooling, this study sought to support the implementation of instructional strategies to meet elementary student's needs in the digital age.

Aim

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of elementary school principals when implementing a new model of schooling that breaks down the barriers of the age = grade traditional model. This study also identified best practices for multiage learning, mastery learning, and blended learning in elementary schools.

Problem

Elementary schools in the United States are increasingly called upon to produce creative thinkers and problem solvers to compete in the dynamic and global economy of the future (Mitra, 2014). However, the traditional model of elementary schooling that has roots in the colonial and industrial eras does not meet today's standards. Students' learning to collaborate with all ages and types of people is a needed skill in the digital age. According to Hoffman (2002), "What is interesting, and perhaps unique to the multi-age classroom, is how students have learned to accept differences in abilities and social behaviors" (p. 49). Moving to a multi-age mastery based model of schooling within a blended learning environment promises to give students the skills they need to be successful collaborators and problem solvers.

Research Findings

A phenomenological qualitative research design was used for the study. Six elementary school principals in schools that have implemented some aspects of multiage learning, mastery learning, and blended learning were interviewed to construct a description of their experience of breaking down the barriers of age = grade traditional elementary schooling. The findings showed that teacher capacity, progression of the curriculum, technology, time/master scheduling, and principal/teacher readiness for change emerged as barriers to moving to a new model of elementary schooling. Many conclusions were revealed in the data, but perhaps the most important was that barriers to changing the age = grade model of elementary schooling are not insurmountable.

Conclusion/Discussion

This study showed that there is a willingness and eagerness to make changes to the traditional age = grade elementary school model to meet the needs of students in the digital age. District administrators and principals who are looking for ways to help schools in moving towards a more innovative approach for students in the digital age could use the information learned in this study. This study also provided recommendations of best practices for multi-age learning, mastery learning, and blended learning in elementary schools as well as factors that may enhance or impede principals from taking a step in a new direction.

Research Implications

The findings, results, interpretations, and conclusions of this study revealed the importance of professional development and teacher commitment when embarking on implementing a new model of elementary schooling. Finally, the important aspects of political, parental, and community beliefs revolving around changing the age = grade traditional model of schooling did not surface in the data in this study. Given these facets, the researcher recommends the following for further study:

- Replicate this phenomenological study in another school district where aspects of multiage, mastery, and blended learning are transpiring in elementary classrooms and compare with this study.
- Conduct a mixed-methods study that brings in the quantitative aspect of student-achievement data to analyze the impact of these learning strategies on student performance.
- Conduct a qualitative phenomenological study that focuses on the impact of professional development and teacher commitment when implementing strategies that change the age = grade traditional model of elementary schooling.
- Conduct a research study on the impact of political, parental, and community beliefs when implementing strategies that change the age = grade traditional model of elementary schooling.

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Author Information and Biography

Dr. Hope Fuss has been an educator for 20 years. She completed her Doctorate at Drexel University focusing on Educational Leadership and Management with a concentration in Educational Administration. She taught middle school science for eight years before going into educational administration. She has served students as an elementary assistant principal, elementary principal, district office supervisor of literacy instruction, and an adjunct professor and supervisor of student teachers for Frostburg State University. She is currently an elementary school principal in Hagerstown, MD. She is passionate about breaking down the barriers of the traditional model of schooling to meet the needs of learners in the digital age.