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ABSTRACT

In 1991, East Ward Elementary School (Texas) exemplified a dilemma in traditional instruction approaches, namely, that teachers working ever harder using traditional approaches were still not preparing the diverse student population to live in a highly technological, fast-paced world. The staff then engaged in research into the concepts of mixed-age/nongraded grouping, continuous progress, interdisciplinary curriculum, and alternative assessment to improve instruction at East Ward. All materials reviewed and all site visits indicated positive results academically and socially for students in nongraded environments. As a result of this research, the Total Learning Community, a nongraded primary program, was implemented at East Ward in the 1992-1993 school year. The program has eight components: (1) non-graded classrooms; (2) vertical teaming, or classrooms including families and wide-ranges of age and experience; (3) early intervention--an all-day pre-kindergarten program, based on the belief that the preschool years are critical for proper development; (4) interdisciplinary curriculum--with a focus on connecting curriculum to life; (5) alternative assessment--based on mastery of interim growth stages and outcome objectives; (6) inclusion--providing for the needs of individual learners; (7) parental involvement--aimed at renewing parental interest; and (8) a positive classroom climate. All assessment measures indicate accelerated growth for students in the Total Learning Community, and especially for students who stay in the program for at least 2 years. Contains 13 references. (WJC)

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Restructuring for Student Success

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RESTRUCTURING FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

INTRODUCTION

Educators in the United States find themselves in a difficult position. They are dedicated, caring professionals striving to give students the necessary skills to be fully functioning members of society, but their efforts do not meet the expectations of that society. Working harder using traditional approaches is not preparing the diverse student population to live in a highly technological, fast-paced world.

East Ward Elementary School exemplified this dilemma in 1991. Teachers spent long hours planning, making materials, covering the required curriculum, and assessing student progress. Students went through the motions of learning but were not making the necessary connections to internalize knowledge. Instruction was delivered in a very traditional, teacher-centered style. Subjects were taught in rigid time blocks characterized by lecture and textbook exercises. All students, regardless of developmental level, were expected to do the same work. Since students with identified needs (Title 1, English as a Second Language, and Special Education) were pulled out of the classroom for instruction and grading, classroom teachers did not feel responsible for their learning. Students placed in these remedial programs rarely were exited and re-identified as regular education students. The climate of the school was tense as teachers attempted to control students in an authoritative manner by use of sarcasm, intimidation, and corporal punishment. Fighting among students, use of profanity, and disrespect were common discipline problems.

Assessment data supported the perception that change was needed. At the end of the 1991-1992 school year, a significant number of young students were not ready to learn at the next level. Only 51% of kindergarten students scored at the readiness level to enter first grade as measured on an Early Childhood Assessment from the Center for Maturational Studies and 30% of first grade students were retained. Scores in reading and mathematics on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills, the required state assessment, declined from the previous year for every grade level tested (3-5). This model of instruction did not meet the needs of the diverse population of an inner-city school with a low-socioeconomic, high minority student population.

RESEARCH

During the 1991-1992 school year the staff engaged in a literature review and made three site visits to nontraditional schools to research the concepts of mixed-age/nongraded grouping, continuous progress, interdisciplinary curriculum, and alternative assessment. Important sources of information consulted during the research process included *Nongradedness: Helping it to Happen* (Anderson and Pavan, 1993), *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children From Birth Through Age 8* (Bredekamp, 1987), *When Writers Read* (Hansen, 1987), *The Case for Mixed-age Grouping in Early Education* (Katz, Evangelou, and Hartman, 1990), and *Making Meaning: Integrated Language Arts Series* (ASCD, 1992).

Anderson and Pavan (1993) summarized the results of research comparing graded and nongraded schools and reached five general conclusions:

1. Comparisons of graded and nongraded schools using standardized achievement tests continue to favor nongradedness.
2. Attendance in a nongraded school may improve the students' chances for good mental health and positive attitudes toward school.
3. Longitudinal studies indicate that the longer students are in a nongraded program, the more likely it is that they will have positive school attitudes and better academic achievement.
4. A nongraded environment is particularly beneficial for blacks, boys, underachievers, and students of lower socioeconomic status in terms of academic achievement and mental health.
5. Further research is needed that includes an assessment of the actual practices in the allegedly graded or nongraded schools in order to determine if the labels as described are accurate. (p. 44)

In addition, new approaches to instruction were being encouraged by governmental agencies. The Texas Administrative Code in its description of a well-balanced elementary curriculum stated, "Instruction may be provided in a variety of arrangements and settings including but not limited to mixed-age programs designed to permit flexible learning arrangements for developmentally appropriate instruction for all student populations" [TAC 75.141(a)].

All materials reviewed and all site visits indicated positive results academically and socially for students in nongraded environments. This structure appeared to be especially beneficial

to students who were demographically similar to East Ward's population. As a result of this research, the Total Learning Community, a nongraded primary program, was implemented in the 1992-1993 school year.

PROCESS

The restructuring process is dynamic in nature. Each change invites or causes other changes. The Total Learning Community has been evolving for five years and will continue to change as student needs are identified and staff members gain new understanding of the educational process. Components of restructuring initiated since 1992 include mixed-age/nongraded classrooms, vertical teaming, early intervention, interdisciplinary curriculum, alternative assessment, increased parental involvement, improved learning climate, and inclusion. The following sequence was used to implement these initiatives.

- 1992-93
 - Nongraded primary classrooms (K-2) - Students are placed at random in classrooms with membership balanced by age, sex, and ethnicity. No ability grouping is used.
 - Interdisciplinary curriculum in primary classrooms
 - Alternative assessment in primary classrooms
 - All day kindergarten
- 1993-94
 - Inclusion (all levels) - Requested by classroom teachers
- 1994-95
 - Nongraded intermediate (3-4) classrooms with interdisciplinary curriculum and alternative assessment

- 1995-96 · Vertical teaming
- All day prekindergarten
- Positive discipline and social skills training
- 1996-97 · Curriculum refinement using Dimensions of Learning (Marzano, Pickering, Arrendondo, Blackburn, Brandt, & Moffett, 1992)

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

East Ward Elementary currently has an enrollment of approximately 525 students in grades prekindergarten through five. Of these students, over 70% are ethnic minorities, 83% are on the free or reduced lunch program, 17% do not speak English as their first language, 15% are enrolled in the English as a Second Language program, and 15% are identified as special education students.

The Total Learning Community is an active learning environment which encourages individual development and fosters the growth of staff and students by providing all community members opportunities for Teamwork, Leadership, and Creativity. A collaborative model of leadership encourages the staff to take an active role in their personal learning and in the development of the instructional model. East Ward is becoming a learning organization as staff members build shared vision and engage in team learning (Senge, 1990).

At the present time, the instructional model at East Ward is characterized by eight instructional components.

Nongraded Classrooms

The Total Learning Community exhibits the characteristics of a

nongraded environment as defined by Anderson & Pavan (1992) and Katz, et al. (1990):

- resembles family and neighborhood groupings
- allows for the development of social skills and leadership opportunities
- reduces competition/stress and develops self-esteem, therefore minimizing behavior problems
- builds on what children know by allowing individuals to work in various situations while providing opportunities for maximum growth
- utilizes multiple sources of documentation for the reporting process
- involves children in assessing and interpreting academic progress
- provides teachers a longer time period to view results
- allows teachers, students and parents to develop more meaningful relationships
- allows teachers to be facilitators of learning
- allows children to work at developmental levels rather than being forced to fit predetermined programs

Vertical Teaming

Classrooms in the Total Learning Community are organized into vertical teams (Families). Each Family includes students with a wide-range of ages (prekindergarten through fifth grade), abilities, and experiences as well as teachers with the expertise to support the needs of all students. This continuous progress model, focused on meeting individual needs, provides opportunities for acceleration and enables all special program students to be

served in the regular classroom. Advantages include:

- an increased sense of community with siblings placed on the same team
- facilitation of parent participation in school activities due to team scheduling
- opportunities for teachers to plan a wider range of developmentally appropriate experiences due to sharing during team planning
- lack of competitiveness between large groups of same-age students which leads to a reduction in discipline problems
- flexibility between classrooms which allows a broader range of nongradedness for students (e.g., an advanced primary student may work in an intermediate classroom for appropriate parts of the day)
- less anxiety for parents and students as students progress through classrooms because of increased familiarity with teachers

Early Intervention

Believing that the preschool years are critical for the proper development of the total child, an exemplary all-day prekindergarten program has been developed. The child-centered classrooms are very active as students explore and interact with the language-rich environment and with other community members. Frequent field-based instruction trips in the surrounding community provide opportunities for vocabulary development and general awareness.

Interdisciplinary Curriculum

The instructional staff has established learning goals and adopted three year-long interdisciplinary curriculum themes: COMMUNITY, CHANGE, and DISCOVERY (Drake, 1993; Kovalik & Olsen, 1993). These themes were chosen based on the learning goals that had been selected by the staff and after verifying that they met the criteria of Ernest Boyer's Eight Commonalities connecting curriculum to life (1981). Teachers on each vertical team meet weekly to plan the details of curriculum implementation using the Dimensions of Learning Model (Marzano, et al., 1992). The experiential curriculum is designed with many opportunities for real life investigations and applications. The goals of the curriculum writing are "designing and orchestrating lifelike, enriching, and appropriate experiences for learners (and) ensuring that students process experience in such a way as to increase the extraction of meaning" (Caine & Caine, 1991, p. 8). Instructional delivery involves a wide variety of strategies and materials to actively engage learners with differing intelligence strengths and learning styles (Lazear, 1991).

Each student works on his/her own instructional level, mastering objectives at a pace appropriate to individual learning styles and abilities. Consideration of time, choice, structure, community, and response help staff members facilitate active learning (ASCD, 1992). Flexible skill groups, cooperative groups, one-on-one and large group lessons provide students with learning experiences in a variety of settings. A strength of the interdisciplinary curriculum is the focus on real-life activities that include decision making, investigation, experimental inquiry, problem solving, and investigation (Marzano, et al., 1992).

Student projects, presentations, dramas, field trips, service learning and student demonstrations are used to create developmentally appropriate learning experiences. Immersing students in these types of activities brings life to what otherwise might be meaningless studies.

Alternative Assessment

Student progress is measured by mastery of interim growth stages and academic objectives leading to the completion of outcome objectives derived from the Texas essential elements. Formal testing, teacher observation, portfolio assessment, and checklist analysis are all part of the assessment process. No numerical grades are given. Students are not promoted or retained until the end of their primary years (2nd grade) and at the end of their intermediate years (4th grade). Students transferring to other campuses during the school year are assigned a grade level in reading, language, and mathematics.

Teachers have designed a portfolio system with required and optional student pieces. Each portfolio piece is labeled giving information about student progress. A narrative report card details student growth in Language Arts, Mathematics, Social Development, Physical Development, and Aesthetic Development.

Student progress is reported to parents at required portfolio conferences held four times during the year. At each conference the student reviews the portfolio with the parent. The student, parent, and teacher reflect and set goals for the next reporting period. Because the assessment process provides a comprehensive, in-depth picture of the total child, the reporting system is enthusiastically supported by the parents.

Inclusion

The school has been restructured to meet the needs of individual learners and provide opportunities for their growth. Students who previously felt uncomfortable in or who were excluded from East Ward's learning environment are now invited to explore, risk, and learn in a safe, accepting climate. All students regardless of special program designations are at home in this continuous progress model. With initiatives in place to make the school fit the child, rather than the child fit the school, inclusion is a natural result of the restructuring process (Villa & Thousand, 1995).

Special program personnel work with regular education personnel to provide collaborative and direct support for all students. Collaborative support may include the design of instructional activities, modifications, social/behavioral interventions, and classroom structure to positively impact the development of individual students. Direct instructional support enables resources to be used to benefit all students resulting in a reduced student/teacher ratio and more child-centered grouping in classes.

Parental Involvement

The practice of having students stay with the same teacher for more than one year (primary 3, intermediate 2), keeping siblings in the same vertical team, and requiring parents to meet with teachers four times a year has greatly enhanced parent-teacher relationships and led to increased parental involvement in a wide variety of school activities. An active volunteer program, a rejuvenated PTA, Family Math nights, vertical team family

activities, and active participation on the site-based management team are evidence of renewed parent interest in their children's education.

Positive Climate

The development of the Total Learning Community has created an open, inviting atmosphere where all participants feel welcome. Students warmly greet and freely interact with the frequent visitors to the classrooms. Parents and community members come to volunteer their services or observe classes. Students keep the school tidy and report any problem with the building or grounds. There is a positive feeling throughout the building.

RESULTS

East Ward is characterized by an open, inviting atmosphere where parents actively participate in their children's school activities. All community members - staff, students, and parents - support each other as they work to prepare students for the future. This positive community relationship has led to a decrease in discipline problems with almost no fighting or profanity and virtually no vandalism of school property for the past two years.

The practice of not considering retention for primary students until the end of their second grade year has led to a decrease in the number of students retained. At the end of the 1991-92 school year, thirty-eight (38) primary students were retained; at the end of the 1995-96 school year, fifteen primary students were retained.

All assessment measures indicate accelerated growth for students in the Total Learning Community. This is especially true

for students who stay in the program for at least two years.

End of kindergarten testing using the Early Childhood Assessment shows an increase in students ready for first grade from 51% in 1991- 92 to 94% in 1995-96.

Special Education students were assessed with a variety of measures including Brigance Diagnostic Inventories, Carolina Curriculum for Preschoolers with Special Needs, Early Childhood Assessment, and Portfolio Growth Assessment at the end of the first year of the inclusion program. Results from these assessments indicated that 75% of the students had growth rates equal to or greater than time measured.

Percent of students meeting the state passing standard on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills has steadily improved at the grade levels tested (3-5) beginning with the 1993-94 school year. Gains for the past year, 1994-95 to 1995-96, are ten (10) percentage points in reading and writing and eighteen (18) percentage points in mathematics.

CONCLUSION

Through the restructuring process, the Total Learning Community with eight new instructional components was implemented at East Ward Elementary. These components are mixed-age/nongraded classrooms, vertical teaming, early intervention, interdisciplinary curriculum, alternative assessment, increased parental involvement, improved learning climate, and inclusion. We believe that these components are interactive and reinforce each other and that nongraded classrooms, interdisciplinary

curriculum, and alternative assessment are the necessary foundation for the successful implementation of an inclusion program.

Throughout the restructuring process the staff members at East Ward have committed themselves to meet the needs of all their students. The focus on individual student needs and the warm, accepting atmosphere encourage students to become active, contributing members of the community and to become risk-takers in their learning. In this setting all groups of students have made notable progress.

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