Multiage Education and Student Perceptions

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Multiage Education and Student Perceptions

by

Michelle Marie Barton

August 2010
Abstract

This thesis was designed to explore my growing curiosity about students’ perceptions of their reading development within my multiage classroom. I looked at multilevel reader’s theater groups to explore perceptions of reading development in multiage classrooms. This multiage grouping occurred twice a week for five weeks. In order to answer this research question, I used interviews and observations. Some students were videotaped and others were in a group that I observed. My analysis led to themes and patterns pertaining to help; specifically, the types of help, the ways in which older and younger students offer help, and how students construct standards and norms for helping. I found that students in my particular multiage classroom have positive perceptions of their reading development regardless of reading ability or traditional grade level.
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Michelle Marie Barton

August 2010

A Thesis submitted to the
Department of Education and Human Development of the
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Multia ge Educa tion and Student Perceptions

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Demands for educational reforms have haunted the classrooms and hallways of schools across America. Changes in legislation and requirements for students and teachers have prompted a reflection on current educational practices. The changes stretch beyond a need for instructional reform; structural improvements are required, too (Heins, Tichenor, Coggins, & Hutchinson, 2000). Multiage education may answer the call of these reformers.

Multiage classrooms have been in existence throughout the history of education. The “one room school house” was the ultimate non-graded classroom. There eventually became enough students so that educators could teach groups of children around the same age. After that, a curriculum developed for each group and this philosophy of education has remained in place for the vast majority of schools. We continue to instruct through a graded context (Kinsey, 2001), curriculum, and pedagogy. Students are now failing or accelerating through a construct, a curriculum, expectations, and assessments, which we built. As teachers in a graded structure, we now have to worry about students meeting benchmarks or navigating through a certain grade level curriculum, regardless of what the child is actually able to do.

The recent prompts for educational reform indicate that this is not working; there must be another way to educate students in today’s school system. A look back at multiage education was needed. A vast body of research has developed to explore the academic and social benefits or disadvantages within a multiage classroom. No clear trend has developed to indicate that multiage or graded classrooms are better for
students academically. Some favor multiage education, some favor a graded structure, and many are inconclusive (Katz, Evangelou, & Hartman, 1990). Although it is not clear as to which structure is better academically, research shows that multiage education has many intellectual, physical, dispositional, social, and emotional advantages over graded classrooms (McClellan & Kinsey, 1997). A large amount of quantitative research has examined the academic and affective benefits or disadvantages of multiage classrooms in comparison to graded classrooms. The body of research has tried to identify which group of students can read more sight words better, who can read nonsense words better, and which group is better at standardized testing. More recently, qualitative researchers have attempted to explore stakeholder’s perceptions of the multiage classroom versus a graded classroom, still trying to compare the two structures. Even with this large body of research, when I examine the literature, a large gap glares out at me; how do students see their reading development in a multiage classroom?

This research project grew out of my desire to explore how students see themselves as literacy learners in a multiage setting. Beyond this general purpose, I explored the following research question: How do students perceive their reading development within the context of a multiage classroom?

As a teacher in a multiage setting, I needed to understand the students’ perceived literacy development to better address their educational needs. A qualitative study highlighted these perceptions as well as filled a void in the current body of research (Kinsey, 2001). The findings informed my instruction, as well as
provided insight to other educators who may be involved in a similar situation.
Without this knowledge, my daily interactions and instruction lacked the insight that I
gained from this study.

For the context of my research, the following definitions should be considered:

1. A multiage classroom is defined as a classroom in which students
   of differing abilities and ages, of at least two years, are taught in
   the same classroom without division into grade levels (Hoffman,
   2002).

2. A perception is defined as a student’s view of oneself as a
developing reader.

To explore the research question of the study, I used reader’s theater as a
multiage grouping. Both reader’s theater and multiage education are grounded in the
principles of social constructivism. Vygotsky’s theory of how students construct
knowledge plays an important role in both reader’s theater and multiage education. In
reader’s theater, students work together to construct meaning out of a written script.
As for multiage education, especially my classroom based on developmentally
appropriate instruction and inquiry, socially constructed learning is essential.
Vygotsky’s theory places the teacher in a unique role of helping students through an
active process of learning; he states that “the teacher must be like the rails on which
trains travel freely and independently, receiving from the rails only the direction
which to travel” (Vygotsky, 1997, p. 48). In multiage classrooms, the teacher cannot
teach students the same curriculum, in the same way, or at the same time. Instruction needs to be differentiated and appropriate for each individual student. As for the students, Vygotsky believed that students develop through instruction and imitation; this imitation and instruction from a more capable other allows students to rise to a new academic, social, and emotional level (Vygotsky, 1962). With a classroom full of older peers, younger students are granted an additional set of role models to follow and imitate. Both reader’s theater and multiage groupings allow students to work together and learn from each other by allowing many thoughtful and purposeful interactions to create meaning with one another.

In order to address students’ perceptions within our classroom, I interviewed students prior to starting the research study and then observed during their multiage reader’s theater groups. Quick additional follow up interviews after the reader’s theater groups occurred when it yielded more information about a student’s perception. My analysis was rooted in grounded theory and explored themes and patterns that emerged through the data collection process. Exploring patterns and trends across all of the data collection methods, as well as across different students, allowed for reliable results due to a triangulated data set.
Chapter 2

Review of the Literature

To fully understand how students perceive themselves as readers in a multiage classroom, we must first look at multiage education as an instructional method. Further, we will examine the impact of multiage education and student perceptions on academic and social learning.

Multiage Education

What is multiage? This was my first thought as I embarked on my journey as a new teacher in a multiage school. Most literally, multiage instruction refers to students of different ages and abilities being taught together without the confines of a graded structure (Hoffman, 2002). In my particular classroom, I have five, six, seven, and eight year olds. There are no “first graders”, “second graders”, and so on; rather, these larger groupings, referred to as primary or intermediate classes, represent a span of at least two traditional grade levels (Heins, Tichenor, Coggins, & Hutchingson, 2000). This non-traditional classroom develops for many reasons. Over the course of our educational history, multiage classrooms have emerged in response to a lack of funding and other resources, insufficient number of students at one grade level, and a response to school reform. My elementary school chose a multiage approach because we believe in it; to us it’s best practice and the most effective way to educate the whole child.

For those for whom multiage education is a choice, the tenets of their philosophy include developmentally appropriate instruction, child centered learning,
cooperative learning, and a family like atmosphere. This approach to education rises out of the philosophy that students do not progress at the exact same rate; this varying rate does not bode well in the grade level structured curriculum of our schools (Weil, 1996). Instruction in a multiage classroom does not revolve solely around a graded curriculum or grade level benchmarks or assessments. The child becomes the core of the educational process (Aina, 2001). Interests and developmental needs also come to the forefront of instruction. Some grade specific curriculum teaching may occur, but most instruction is taught across grade levels to different ages and abilities (Hoffman, 2002). This is no easy task. Certain standard instructional practices arise as a staple to teach effectively in a multiage classroom. Collaboration, peer learning, small group work, and flexible grouping are common within a repertoire of an effective multiage teacher (Hoffman, 2002). These varying groupings of students within a multiage classroom allow for different learning opportunities for students and allow teachers to address the many different needs of students within an instructional day. Scaffolding instruction within the different groupings allows students to continue on the educational path at their own pace, with the expectation that they will eventually achieve the goals they have not met yet. A multiage classroom, and thus the removal of the graded structural system to education, allows students to progress at their own pace in a supportive, risk-free, family like environment (Novick, 1996). Multiage instruction takes into account the developmental needs of each student, not perceived abilities based on grade level expectations.
Impact on Students’ Academic and Social Learning in Multiage Classrooms

A great deal of research has explored both the graded and multiage approach to education with the thought that one must be better. A few issues arise when attempting to do so. When comparing the two different groups, grade level or age is often used to compare the students in a multiage classroom and those in traditional graded rooms. This goes against the principles of multiage education and developmentally appropriate practices. Another concern when evaluating and exploring multiage classrooms is the widely varied definition of multiage instruction. Perhaps these inconsistencies, coupled with inconclusive findings from the research attempting to identify the most effective approach, stem from no set definition of multiage education (Paradini, 2005). The age span encompasses anything over two years; the classroom may be created by choice or out of economic circumstances, and sometimes will not even comprise an entire school, simply a school within a school. This very broad definition would make it hard to compare multiage classrooms, let alone differing instructional programs.

Not only are researchers working with a very loose and broad definition of multiage classrooms, they are also looking at results given from differing standardized assessments. Historically, when exploring the benefits of either structure, standardized assessments have been the evaluation instrument of choice. These assessments provide only a snapshot of a group of children, and therefore an instructional program, at a certain time. More importantly, these assessments typically assess recall of words or a timed reading passage. We must look further; we
should be assessing students in an authentic reading task (Fosco, Schleser, & Andal, 2004). Also, the use of so many standardized assessments is ineffective when trying to compare the two instructional programs. The Stanford Achievement Test, the Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test, the California Achievement Test, and the Wide Range of Achievement Test 3 all yield different results at different times. There is no consistency or reliability across the measures, so it is unclear which one to believe when there are no consistent trends across the body of research. The following section outlines the inconclusive results of the academic impact of multiage classrooms.

When exploring the effectiveness of multiage education, most of the research in the past has consisted of quantitative research comparing multiage and single graded classrooms and programs. Overall, the research suggests that students in a multiage classroom typically, although not conclusively, score better on standardized tests (Brody, 1970). A range of standardized assessments have been employed to assess the effectiveness of this educational philosophy. In 1970, the assessment of choice was the Stanford Achievement Test, showing higher scores for the nongraded pupils (Brody). In 1974, it was the Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test, documenting no statistical significance between the two organizational philosophies to education (MacDonald & Wurster, 1974), meaning multiage instruction does not hinder or accelerate reading behaviors at the first grade level. Hopkins, Oldridge, and Williamson (1965) found that reading ability did not differ significantly after three years in a multiage classroom through the California Reading Test. Pratt’s review of the studies up to 1983 reveal that three studies favor the graded system to education,
12 are inconclusive, and 10 favor multiage education when looking at academic achievement (as cited in Katz, Evangelou, & Hartman, 1990). More recently, it has been found that students in multiage classrooms develop higher cognitive levels before their single graded counterparts as shown on the Kaufman-Brief Intelligence test. Within that same study, the higher cognitive level did not reflect a higher level of reading ability on the Wide Range of Achievement Test 3 (Fosco, Schleser & Andal, 2004). There is no significant trend in the body of research to indicate whether a multiage or a graded approach to education is more beneficial to reading development.

Luckily, multiage instruction stretches far beyond the academic development of students and researchers can explore other domains in education. Particularly, this innovative approach fosters development in intellectual, physical, dispositional, social, and emotional domains (McClellan & Kinsey, 1997). These “hidden” aspects to education prove to favor a non-graded structure to education. So much of educational achievement is linked to the emotions and attitudes related to education that it is often just as important. Embarking on an individualized pace to education allows students to be exempt from social and emotional harm when they do not meet grade level expectations (Novick, 1996). Students gain confidence through obtaining individualized goals, no longer feeling embarrassed if they fail a test or do not read on grade level.

Every student has the opportunity to feel like the expert in some regard over his or her time in a multiage classroom. This feeling can be enhanced through peer
interactions and various groupings. “If learning tasks involve children working together instead of individually or competitively, fruitful collaboration between “novices” and “experts” can occur” (Katz, Evangelou, & Hartman, 1990, p. 41). In most cases, the oldest students will at some point take on the role as the expert or the leader within these interactions. A decreased stress level may be an outcome of working with younger peers in an area in which they are behind their same aged peers (Katz, Evangelou, & Hartman, 1990). Being the oldest student in the classroom also allows for a leadership role to develop. Children can benefit from this newfound role within a multiage classroom. Helping another person can deepen the understanding of the person in the teaching role (Novick, 1996) and lead to higher self-esteem. Students indicate higher levels of self-confidence, maturity, and responsibility (Aina, 2001); which perhaps is attributed to the learning techniques and groupings within the classroom.

The benefits outside of academic achievement do not stop there. Since students are with the same teacher for at least two years, students create deeper relationships with peers and the teacher, as well as become extremely familiar with the expectations of the classroom (Novick, 1996). The comfort with the teacher and classroom transfers year to year; time is not wasted getting to know each other at the beginning of each year (Aina, 2001). It’s no wonder that the greatest levels of achievement come from the students who stayed in a multiage education the longest. Students in the second year of a multiage program mark larger differences on the Stanford Achievement Test than those in their first year when compared to the graded
The positive relationships expand beyond the student-teacher relationship. Children in a multiage program have been found to possess more pro-social behaviors, specifically having relationships grounded in friendship, a higher acceptance of peers, and being less aggressive than their graded counterparts (McClellan & Kinsey, 1997). Social competence is heightened through peer and teacher role models. Additionally, parent-teacher relationships are stronger (Klostad & McFadden, 1998). The various stakeholders involved in a child’s education benefit by stronger relationships when participating in a multiage program. All of these positive relationships stem from the sense of continuity that comes from the same teacher, parents, and students interacting year after year (Klostad & McFadden, 1998). All of these “hidden” aspects to academic success greatly favor multiage education.

Perceptions

There is a new body of developing research that explores the perception of the individuals involved in education. It has been shown that student perceptions have a great impact on the social and emotional aspects of education. We also know that the feelings and emotions surrounding learning and the educational process influences academic achievement. Aina (2001) investigates student, teacher, and parent perceptions in one of her studies. She highlights the benefits of the multiage program through parent and student comments; specifically how the gains in the social and emotional domains reveal greater development in academic achievement (Aina,
This changed outlook on research has put the child back in the center of education.

A great deal of recent research has explored student perceptions as related to academic achievement, especially in the area of reading development. Researchers have found a link between a child’s perceptions and attitudes towards reading. For instance, students who have positive perceptions of themselves as a reader often reflect more positive attitudes towards the reading process and reading activities; this positive outlook towards reading leads to reading more frequently and for a longer period of time (Hogsten & Peregoy, 1999). Although there is no direct correlation between perceptions and reading level, we can conclude that students who read more often and for a longer period of time become stronger readers. It makes sense, the more you read, the better you get at it. If you view yourself as a poor reader, you will be less motivated to read, and therefore read less frequently and develop fewer reading skills (Hogsten & Peregoy, 1999). This influences not only one’s perceptions as a reader, but also actual reading abilities (Matthews & Kesner, 2003). This is a self-fulfilling prophecy in that struggling readers continue to struggle.

I became curious about the perceptions of students in my classroom; if perceptions play such an important role in academic and emotional development, then I want to know how perceptions develop and change within my classroom. Most generally, perceptions are developed through interactions with others; teachers, parents, and other students play a significant role in shaping and developing perceptions within the classroom (Matthews & Kesner, 2003). The reading
experiences within my classroom attempt to include all students, but also allow for individualized or small group instruction. Students are constantly interacting with other students in literacy centers during reader’s workshop. These interactions involving literacy lead students to develop certain perceptions about their capabilities as readers and writers (Matthews & Kesner, 2003). These developing perceptions are impacted in two main ways. Students develop self perceptions about reading based on participation and performance in reading and reading related tasks (Hogsten & Peregoy, 1999). Therefore, a student’s participation, or nonparticipation, in a group can positively or negatively impact a student’s perceptions of his or herself as a reader. In my multiage classroom, some of my younger friends are just not developmentally ready to participate in the same reading tasks as some of my older friends nor are they capable of producing the same level of quality as my older friends. To me, that is what multiage education is all about- students participating and engaging as readers at their developmental level. But to the students, perhaps the wide range of abilities within a multiage setting only intensify students’ perceptions of themselves as readers, and therefore their reading development as well.

The lack of decisive, consistent findings from quantitative research on academic achievement (MacDonald & Wurster, 1974) has prompted me to explore a qualitative study to generate new findings on students’ perception of their reading development within a multiage classroom.
Chapter 3

Methods

The methodology described in this chapter is designed to explore students’ perceptions within my multiage classroom. My students often still refer to themselves by grade level and are continually exploring this notion of a traditional graded system. Their comments, questions, and general interactions had left me wondering how students perceive themselves in this multiage context. The use of interviews and observations proved to be the most effective method of collecting data to help answer the research question of this study:

How do students in a multiage classroom perceive their reading development within the context of a multiage classroom?

Participant Selection and Research Environment

The setting for this research study took place in my classroom. The elementary school is a part of a suburban district in western New York. The district educates 4,500 enrolled students through its high school, middle school, and three elementary school programs (New York State Report Card, 2008). In my particular school, we accommodate the learning needs of over 400 students. In addition to being the smallest elementary school in the district, we have many other unique characteristics. Being a school of choice, parents apply to send their child to the school and acceptance is based on a lottery system. Acceptance into the school is limited to only 60 students per traditional grade level. This particular elementary school is an approved International Baccalaureate school and prides itself on an
inquiry approach. Hands-on, inquiry based instruction is the basis for all subject areas, but drives our science and social studies curriculum. A balanced literacy approach through the use of writer’s workshop and reader’s workshop, math workshop, Spanish instruction, and fine arts instruction round out the academic day.

The school has been multiage since its creation in 1994 and was designed to mimic real world life and work experiences. As a part of a recent restructuring, the kindergarten classrooms became single graded units; the rest are broken into primary, elementary, and intermediate classes consisting of two grade levels. A kindergarten through sixth grade family like unit is maintained throughout three hallways and cross grade level interactions are a weekly occurrence. The educators in our school truly believe that multiage education is the best way to educate the diverse range of learners in our school. This range includes 5% of the student population receiving special education services and 16% qualifying for free and reduced lunch. As for ethnic diversity, 94% of the population is white; 2% are of African-American descent; 2% of Hispanic or Latino descent; and 2% of Asian, native Hawaiian, or other Pacific Islander descent (New York State Report Card, 2008). My classroom reflects the same diverse range of learners as the school.

As for the classroom, the class maintains a lower class size through the Class Size Reduction program. Fourteen students interact with me in our classroom on a daily basis. Additional push in and pull out academic intervention support is provided through reading specialists, math specialists, and special education support. The class consists of fourteen students; eight females and six males. Since the classroom is
multia ge, the range of ages spans three years and two grade levels. Students in the
target classroom range from five to eight years old. There was one five year old, five
six year olds, six seven year olds, and one eight year old in my classroom at the start
of the 2009 through 2010 school year.

Although the students only span two traditional grade levels, their
developmental reading levels extend over five grade levels, ranging from a
Developmental Reading Assessment score of level 2 to level 40. With that being said,
most reading instruction occurs through whole group strategy instruction and more
individualized small group guided reading instruction. Additional reading instruction
is provided through the balanced literacy framework. Other multia ge groupings are
used throughout the day, especially during our inquiry time.

I asked my fourteen students to participate in the study. Prior to the start of the
study, each family received a letter outlining the research study, what their child
would be specifically participating in, and how their child’s confidentiality would be
maintained. In addition to the letter, the parent or guardian was asked to sign a
consent form, indicating their approval of their child’s participation in the study.
Those students who received parental consent were read a description of the study,
along with what will be expected of them if they chose to participate in the study. To
show assent, each child willing to participate wrote his or her name and date on the
assent form.
For the purpose of this study, I looked at reader’s theater as a multiage grouping. Reader’s theater is only one instructional method that promotes effective and efficient reading strategies. In reader’s theater, students read a text and can use only their voice to convey the meaning of the text; no props, acting, costumes, or scenery are used to help enhance meaning as in typical dramatic productions (Young & Rasinski, 2009). All that is needed for reader’s theater is the script and people in order to perform. Therefore, students must use fluent and expressive reading to help the audience construct meaning (Moran, 2006). The ultimate goal is that students will be able to read the script just as naturally and effortlessly as a conversation (Young & Rasinski, 2009). In order for fluent and expressive reading to occur, many repeated readings are necessary. Modeled readings and mini-lessons on the three components of fluency—accuracy, automaticity, and prosody, are also necessary. The three components of fluency are described as follows: accuracy is the ability to read the words correctly, automaticity is the ability to read the words effortlessly or with little to no problem solving, and prosody is the ability to read a text with expression and phrasing given the pragmatic context of the text (Young & Rasinski, 2009). Paying attention to these aspects of fluency has many potential benefits for students. First, some research has found that students with strong oral reading fluency tend to have stronger reading comprehension when reading silently and vice versa (Young & Rasinski, 2009). Fluency does not automatically lead to comprehension; however, the two aspects of reading appear to be related. Additionally, reader’s theater has shown
to have a motivating and positive effect on reluctant readers (Moran, 2006). Working with reader’s theater scripts to improve fluency, especially within the context of a balanced literacy framework, provides students with a rich learning experience, both within the academic and affective domains of education.

When reflecting on our daily classroom routines, reader’s theater instantly jumped out as a time when students of different ages and abilities were exploring the realm of reading together. Both multiage instruction and reader’s theater share common, basic principles that allow the two approaches to instruction to coincide within my classroom. The first is that both multiage instruction and reader’s theater are designed to meet the diverse range of learners’ needs that we encounter in our classrooms. Students can participate in reader’s theater groups regardless of their reading level or age. Best of all, students can participate with other students who may not be the same age or level. Reader’s theater scripts can be adapted to meet the individual needs of each student, but still allow for equal opportunities for success within the group (Moran, 2006). Allowing all students to succeed within the same learning environment increases confidence among all students in the group (Clark, Morrison, & Wilcox, 2009). The use of reader’s theater as a multiage grouping allows my students to interact with students of other ages and abilities.

The other basic principle that both multiage instruction and reader’s theater have in common is appealing to the interests of each student. Both reader’s theater and multiage instruction can be used to address certain curricular content, but they can also be used to appeal to the interests of the students involved. Helping students
explore the world of literacy through their prior knowledge, skill level, and interest increases motivation for learning. This can be powerful when working with reluctance readers (Moran, 2006). Beyond appealing to the topic or interest of the students, reader’s theater can explore a wide variety of genres. Excerpts or whole letters, poems, tall tales, fairytales, stories, or even student created stories can be used (Moran, 2006). Varying genres can appeal to student interests as well.

To address the original research question of this project, we used reader’s theater, as a multi age grouping, to explore students’ perceptions of their reading development. Grouping students of different grade levels and abilities within a reader’s theater group, along with the other data collection methods, yielded insight into each child’s perceptions of her or his reading development within the multiage classroom.

Data Collection

Observations and interviews were the two methods of data collection to address the research question of the study. At the beginning of the study, each participating student was interviewed individually. The questions, some created by me and some adapted from Kidwatching: Documenting Children's Literacy Development (Goodman & Owocki, 2002), explored each child’s perceptions of her or his reading development in our multiage classroom (see Appendix A). As a semi-structured interview, follow up questions accompanied the following five questions:

1. Who is a good reader that you know?

2. What makes him or her a good reader?
3. How could you help someone having trouble reading?

4. If you were having trouble reading, whom would you go to for help in our classroom? Why?

5. Pretend you are talking to a kindergartner in our school. How would you describe to a kindergarten friend what reading is like in our classroom?

The interviews took place in our classroom during reader’s workshop. The student and I sat next to each other at our guided reading table so that it felt more like a conversation. Each interview was audio taped and then sections were transcribed for further analysis.

Throughout the study, observation of the multilevel reader’s theater groups further illuminated student perceptions. The group’s interactions were recorded through the use of a video camera. I videotaped each time we participated in our reader’s theater script. We practiced our script two times a week in the afternoons. I was able to record one group each time. Sections of the recordings were transcribed for further analysis. I recorded my observations in field notes through the use of a two column journal. The left side housed observations, while the right side was used to record thoughts and questions about my observations.

In addition, quick, informal interviews sometimes followed the reader’s theater groups to clarify the observations I made. These particular students were pulled aside right after the experience to have a quick conversation about the experiences that day. I used these interviews to shed light on the actions, choices, dialogue, and behaviors that I observed during the reader’s theater groups, as related
to perceptions of reading development within the classroom. Questions included, what happened today, how did you feel, how did you help, and who did you go to for help. Between these two data collection methods, certain behaviors and interactions like types of help and how help was offered helped answer my research question of how students perceive their reading development in my multiage classroom.

This triangulated data set was developed to explore student perceptions of reading development in the context of a multiage classroom. The multiple data collection methods and length of the study aided in demonstrating this study as a valid and reliable teacher-action research study. Data collection spanned five weeks. The original interview began the study with observations and follow up interviews occurring over the five weeks.

As mentioned, each student’s confidentiality was maintained throughout the data collection and analysis process. To ensure confidentiality, each student received a pseudonym that was used in place of the child’s actual name. When collecting data, only the pseudonym was recorded. On completion of the study, the data collected from the study was shredded.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process started with data collection; meaning the early analysis drove future data collection. The analysis was rooted in grounded theory. I explored the data to uncover patterns and themes from the data collected, and developed initial codes based on those patterns and themes. To do this I first coded my observations and then transcribed interviews based on the behaviors and
interactions that I was observing and attempting to clarify. I was looking for aspects of the data that fit my initial codes as well as those that did not. As a systematic thinker, indexing my data codes and using outlines was extremely helpful to continue analyzing the data set.

Initial coding started with each individual data collection method with each individual child. These patterns and themes were used to better understand students’ perceptions of their reading development for each child through the different types of data collected. However, individual analysis of the observations, interviews, and possible student work were not sufficient; I discovered themes and patterns that cut across the different measures. A careful look for patterns and themes across students, particularly at a certain grade level or reading level, helped triangulate the data set further. Data analysis was completed when themes and patterns no longer emerge.

Limitations

The purpose of the study is to explore perceptions within a multiage classroom; therefore, the results are limited to my multiage classrooms. Further, the results are only an indicator of the perceptions of my students at this particular time. Other research will need to explore other multiage classrooms at other times in order to explore larger themes that start to transcend the larger body of research.
Chapter #4:
Findings

Gus is reading his lines as Thomas Edison regarding the invention of the electric light bulb. “We need to find a conductor...”

Amy interrupts and corrects him, “A conductor!”

Gus continues, laughing at his mistake. “… find a conductor for the light... for the bulb... for our bulb. It must glow with light, but not burn up.”

“Right!” Mark reads enthusiastically, in the role of Edison’s assistant.

Gus corrects Mark’s reading of the word ‘right’. “No, you’re supposed to read it like right…” Gus makes a confused look to match his reading of the word. All of the students are flipping the pages of the script to get on the next page.

“Edison!” Amy calls out for Gus to read his next line, but Gus is not on the page yet.

“Oh,” Gus replies as he hurries to get to the right spot. He starts and the group continues on reading the script on Thomas Edison and the invention of the electric light bulb.
This vignette is only a glimpse into my experiences over the five week study. The purpose of this study was to explore student’s perceptions within my classroom. Thirteen of my fourteen first and second grade age students participated in the five week study. The research question that drove this study was:

How do students in a multiage classroom perceive their reading development within the context of a multiage classroom?

I collected data through interviews and observations over ten sessions of reader’s theater groups. Data analysis yielded different thoughts and ideas. Watching the groups and again listening to the interviews allowed me develop themes by making connections between data sets, students, and reoccurring behaviors. The rest of this chapter shares these themes and connections.

Not only did the thirteen students who participated in my study help me delve into perceptions of reading development within my classroom, they also helped me develop an increased understanding of the culture of our learning community within our multiage classroom. Although I saw students talking about and helping with literacy behaviors, it became hard for me to separate out the literacy aspect of the task from the culture of our classroom as a whole. How each student perceives him or herself as a reader is only scratching the surface; through this research I was able to see how each child perceived him or herself as a learner and as a teacher in our classroom. The following sections outline my interpretations of the data collected in my multiage classroom; not only will you see how students perceive their reading development, but, more broadly, their perceptions of our learning community.
I started to investigate this notion of students’ perceptions of themselves as both learners and teachers within our classroom after analyzing the data from this study. The role of learner and teacher became very apparent after looking at the manner in which students gave, accepted, and used help. The interviews particularly focused on how students could help others with reading and whom they would go to for help within our classroom. The observations of the reader’s theater groups allowed me to see how students gave and received help within the actual learning community. These two related, but very distinct data sets, yielded interesting results. After analyzing the two data sets, I have developed four main themes. First, a look into what types of help occurred throughout the study will help us better understand perceptions of reading development and of our learning community. Second, I will go a step further and consider the differences in the ways that help is being offered. The third section will look at the routines, behaviors, and expectations that have developed from our learning community. Finally, I will reflect on students who may not have had some of the socially constructed experiences pertaining to offering and receiving help and how they interact within the group.

Types of Help

The opening vignette highlights the wide range of helping behavior observed over the course of the five week study. Not only did all of my students believe that they could help another friend in the class, I was actually able to see each of my students help within the reader’s theater groups; older friends and younger friends alike. I saw older and younger friends offering and receiving help. There were no
boundaries, in terms of age or grade, on who could offer help. Instead, the range of help reflects the diverse reading behaviors and abilities that are present within our learning community. The students’ responses to the interview question on how they could help a friend with reading were closely tied to the reading behaviors that they have under control. For example, Jake, a younger friend who was in the lowest reading group, responded that he would ask the person if they needed help and then help them look through the word. This reading behavior was a strategy that we were working on in guided reading when decoding an unknown word. On the opposite end of the spectrum, Amy, the highest reader in the class and an older friend, responded that she would help them sound out a word, find a resource in the classroom, or tell them if she knows the word in order to help a peer figure out a word. This is fitting because she often doesn’t need help decoding words. She has excellent word solving skills and is often unaware of the strategies she is implementing to solve words. Even more so, the type of help is reflective of the reading behaviors that the person offering help possesses, as well as the person receiving help. It’s as if the students took into account the purpose of the reader’s theater group and the needs and abilities of the members in the group to determine what type of support or help was needed. All of the help with reading aspects of the task related to creating and making meaning of the lines and the script as a whole, but also paralleled what the reader was able to do. The help that students offered pertained to navigating the text, reading words or phrases, monitoring and correcting, and maintaining the task of practicing the reader’s theater script. This broad spectrum of helping behavior is highlighted below.
Help Navigating the Text

All students at some point offered and received help relating to navigating the script during reader’s theater. In every group someone needed help finding the right page, turning the paper the right way, or finding the right spot on the page. The behaviors, related to Concepts about Print (Clay, 1993), are some of the most basic understandings of the reading process. My students have demonstrated these reading skills in guided reading and in other reading situations when reading traditional text. Our reader’s theaters groups were a little different than these traditional reading situations due to the script being in a packet format and the alternating lines of each character. This posed new problems to all of the students at some point. The students were able to draw on their prior knowledge about concepts of print with a traditional text in order to solve these new problems with the reader’s theater scripts. Students were able to use this prior knowledge to help themselves and others navigate the text. The following two excerpts demonstrate how even the most struggling and the most proficient readers in my classroom offered and received help navigating the text.

“But we are flwe don’t find the right conductor, the bulb will keep...” Ray reads, playing the role of one of Thomas Edison’s assistants.

“Suddenly, there is a loud sound in Edison’s lab. Pop, pop, pop, pop, pop!” Amy reads the narrator’s part. The script continues on the next page of the packet, and everyone starts to flip the page of the scripts. Everyone is able to turn
the page correctly, but in the process Lorie loses her spot.

She looks through the packet with a bewildered look trying to find Amy's last line.

Ray continues on with his line, "Bursting!" While everyone continues, Sally notices Lorie is not on the right page. Sally checks her page and looks again at Lorie's script.

She puts her script up in the air in front of Lorie and points to the right spot on the page, showing Lorie what the page should look like. Lorie then finds her place.

Here, Sally, a younger friend who is struggling with reading, was able to help another friend navigate the script and find the right page and the right spot. Even though Sally is one of the lowest readers in the classroom, this type of help does not exceed her capacities as a reader or as a group member. She knew that she could help Lorie with her struggle, so she did. It did not matter that she was not an older friend or a better reader than Lorie; it only mattered that she could help.

This next vignette shows Amy needing help finding her spot and starting her line.

Amy was nodding her head up and down with her thumbs up in the air. She was acting out Jake's line of "Mrs. Cook nodded yes and gave a thumbs up."

Amy, since she was playing around and not looking at her script, fails to start her line.
“Mrs. Cook...” Jamie prompts, pointing to the line and showing Amy where she should be on the page.

“I know what to do!” Amy, clearly embarrassed, grabs her paper and yells at Jamie. She continues on with the script. “What animal has a very long neck?”

This excerpt is important because Amy is an older friend and the highest reader in the class, and has been ever since she came into our classroom in the February of her first grade year. As the highest reader, and student in general, she has been able to function independently in our classroom. Amy rarely needs help within our classroom. This interaction with Jamie was one of the few instances where Amy needed help. It highlights two major points. First, Amy became extremely defensive and agitated when Jamie offered her help. Amy is not used to this interaction. She often becomes frustrated when she is not right or when someone knows something she does not. I will explore this notion further later on in this chapter. The second main point from Jamie and Amy’s interaction is that everyone needs help! Even the most proficient reader in the classroom needed help to navigate the text. It shows that all fourteen students are teachers and learners within the classroom.

Since all of the students have control over these behaviors of helping find the right spot or page, it is not surprising that all of the students were able to offer and receive help pertaining to navigating the text regardless of age, grade, or reading level. Everyone had the advantage of offering and receiving help within the reader’s theater group in terms of navigating the text. In the other types of help that we
explore, this will not be the case. The amount of students who are able to offer help starts to decrease, as well as those that are able to receive the help decreases also.

**Help Solving a Word, Phrase, or Line**

In addition to helping others in the group navigate the text, help decoding words, phrases, or lines was the most common type of help offered. Most students asked, either verbally or non-verbally, for this type of help. Each and every student needed help decoding a word, phrase, or line. Example after example arose in each reader’s theater group where one student helped another decode the script. The scripts were chosen to reflect each child’s independent reading level, so that their lines would not be too hard to read. With this being said, all of the scripts had a large amount of science or social studies content, unfamiliar phrases, or new punctuation to help with transitions and help create meaning. The students in the group relied on each other to help work through these new struggles, typically with students offering and receiving help decoding within the same session. The amount of help needed decreased as the child’s reading level increased, with the higher readers needing help, but not as often. The opposite of this was true, as well. Jake and Sally were the only two students to not help another student with decoding the script. Perhaps, this is because of their reading abilities or their need to focus so much attention on decoding their own lines. Also students who had different lines had harder parts with more difficult words, phrases, and lines, therefore making it even harder for Jake and Sally to help. The other students were able to offer help decoding the script to another member of the group and everyone needed help decoding at some point. The way
they asked for help varied greatly. Here is an example where help can be asked for without even speaking.

_Sally reads her line as a reporter interviewing Thomas Edison._

“With glass...” Sue pauses for a few seconds.

“Bulbs.” Allison whispers.

_Sue continues on._

“bulbs using electricity.

“Indeed!” Gus replies as Thomas Edison. The group continues on.

Here Sally asks for help by just waiting. She pauses for quite a while and signals to the group that she needs help solving a word. Allison offers help; Sally repeats the word and finishes her line. Sally’s long pause signals she needs help. She was able to understand the help being offered because she repeats the word and continues on with line.

In this next example, Allison asks for help by nudging Kim. She did this to signal for help.

_Allison starts reading her line, pretending to be a child who has traveled back in time to meet the Wright Brothers._

“How good is your...” Allison stops reading. She turns her body and paper toward Kim. Allison elbows her to get Kim’s attention. Allison’s hand is pointing to her place in the script.

“Engine.” Kim responds to Allison’s nudge for help.

“Engine.” Allison repeats to finish her line.
This was the most common interaction where students asked for help with decoding. Very rarely did students actually orally ask for help. Long pauses, gestures, and physical interactions were all typical ways for students to ask for help. This nonverbal interaction was effective, but yet not disruptive. Their actions, although silent, conveyed to the group or another person that they needed help. The interactions didn’t take much time and were quick and to the point. My students learned that if someone pauses for a while, points to a word on the paper, or nudges them, then that person needs help. These small nuances convey a lot of meaning about help in our classroom.

More directly, students asked for help by verbally asking for help.

“So lets coat this cotton thread with carbon. Why should we do that?” Gus asks as Thomas Edison.

As Gus reads, Ray moves towards Amy and points to his script.

“What’s this say?” he whispers.

Amy looks at his script and tells him the word—really. Ray reads it correctly in his line.

Ray verbally appeals for help and receives it from Amy. He knew that he did not know the word in his upcoming line. He attempted to gain help before his line came up. Ray’s asking for help was effective, but more disruptive to the group than the other examples.

All three ways were effective and allowed the students to receive the help that they needed. Also, all of the students who were offered help knew that the other
students needed help through their verbal or non-verbal interaction; in addition each helper knew how to help the person asking for help.

When looking at the type of help being offered in the reader’s theater groups, it became clear that this type of help was the most common. I think that this is the case for a few different reasons. First, help decoding a word was the most common response to the interview question, how could you help someone in the classroom who was struggling with reading. Typical responses included the following:

*Look from little words you know in the word or read the rest and go back to see if you know what the word is.* — Brittany

*Teaching them to read better by teaching them strategies- definitely by looking to see if a word sounds like that word.* — Kim

*I would ask them first if they need help, then help them figure it out. I would tell them to look through the word.* — Jake

Not one student replied with anything beyond decoding skills. This indicates to me that students are most comfortable helping with decoding unknown words through a variety of strategies; therefore it became the most common. Secondly, this type of help occurred often because each student was capable of receiving this type of help and almost all of the students were capable of offering this type of help; it was not beyond the current understanding of the students within the group. Finally, it is
the most basic, fundamental way to help create meaning for the listener. Without words, phrases, or lines there would be no script; with missing words, phrases, or lines there would be confusion and a lack of meaning. This type of help needed to occur in order to perform the task.

Help Monitoring and Correcting for Accuracy

Help monitoring and correcting for accuracy occurred much less frequently than the previous two types of help. Students helped others by stopping the group or person when someone missed a line, correcting a substitution of a word, or correcting the pronunciation of a word. A student would typically stop her or his line and ask for help before attempting an unknown word or substituting and incorrect word. Students needed this help to read the text correctly and maintain the meaning of the script. This is especially important in reader’s theater; its entire purpose is to create and maintain meaning out of the script. Any miscues may greatly alter the meaning of the script and confuse the listener. This vignette shows Kim monitoring and correcting Mark’s reading.

“How about a candy jar?” Kim reads as she suggest what a paint jar in the script may be used for.

“Ok, how about this empty treasure box?” Mark reads as the teacher in the script.


“Tissue box!” Mark corrects his line and looks at Gus to continue on.
“Let’s make it into a bird feeder.” Gus reads as the

**group finishes reading the script.**

In this vignette, Mark substitutes the word treasure for the word tissue. This substitution sounds right, looks right, and makes sense. It would be very likely for Mark to continue on reading not realizing that he had made the substitution. Kim, reading along closely with the group, realizes the substitution and corrects Mark before he continues on much farther. He corrects the substitution and continues on with the task. This implies that he understood the miscue he made and used Kim’s help to self-correct.

Similarly, this next excerpt shows Allison correcting Hillary on a substitution.

“**Where are you going to take your when machine next?**” Kim asks pretending to be Orville Wright.

“I don’t know...” Hillary replies as a child visiting from the future.

“We. We don’t know.” Allison corrects Hillary on her line.

“We don’t know.” Hillary continues. “**Wherever it is, I’m going too!**”

Hillary made a miscue that made sense and sounded right. Just like the previous example, it would be unlikely that Hillary would catch this high quality substitution. Allison, reading along closely, corrects Hillary in order to be accurate with what is written in the script. Hillary corrects her substitution and continues. Just as Mark understood his miscue, demonstrated by repeating it and then continuing on,
Hillary does too. Hillary was able to take Allison’s help and then monitor and correct her reading for accuracy. To me, that means that she was able to understand the help that was being offered. Both members of the interaction understood the substitution that was made and how to fix it.

In contrast to the previous examples, here we see Amy offering Sally help monitoring and correcting for accuracy. The difference in this example is that Sally never corrects her miscue.

“You... seem...so...” Sally reads through her lines.

“Sure.” Amy continues to help Sally read her lines.

“That you can perfect...” Sally continues attempting to read the rest of her line. She reads the word ‘perfect’ as meaning something that is flawless or ideal, not the way it is supposed to be said as ‘perfect’ as in that it can be achieved.

“That you can perfect the electric light” Amy reads the word correctly and continues on to model the rest of Sally’s line. The group continues on with the next person reading the next line.

Although Sally spent a great deal of time and energy in order to navigate through the text and decode the words, Amy could not let the incorrect reading of the word ‘perfect’ go uncorrected because it greatly hindered the meaning of the script. Sally’s substitution looks right, but does not sound right or make sense. Sally never corrects her mispronunciation, nor does she ever attempt to finish her line.
independently. This implies that she does not understand the miscue that was made or
the help that she was receiving. The following times this group practiced this script,
Amy read the line with the proper pronunciation each time before Sally even had the
chance to read it incorrectly. Amy understood that Sally did not yet control that
aspect of reading and would need significant help maintaining the meaning of the text
as well as reading her lines. Perhaps this is because Amy saw that she did not correct
the original error and that indicated to Amy that Sally didn’t understand. Sally never
practiced this pronunciation or even attempted to say it differently at all, as we have
seen in the other examples. Amy saw this and assumed it must be something that
Sally could do not independently. She was right; this higher level reading behavior is
not something that Sally has control over yet; nor do I believe that Sally understands
that the word ‘perfect’ can be read in two different ways. The word perfect, as she
read it, is in her oral vocabulary; but the word perfect, pronounced as it should be in
the script, is not. Amy’s helping in this regard is strictly related to maintaining the
purpose of the task, to create meaning out of the script. As seen before, in our
learning community we help when someone needs help. Amy helped Sally each time
because she knew that she would need help.

In the above examples, we saw different ways in which students offered and
received help with monitoring and self-correcting for accuracy. Students who needed
this type of help needed it for two distinct reasons; either they did not realize they
were making an error or they were unable to understand the error they were making.
For this first case, Mark makes a substitution in one of the following skits. His
substitution makes sense, sounds right, and looks right. His miscue did not drastically change the meaning of the script or was so outlandish it would never have fit in the script in the first place. Mark just simply needed help monitoring his reading because his substitution was so similar to the actual text. His quick, proficient network of reading strategies produced a high quality miscue that did not signal to Mark that there was a problem. On the other hand, Sally’s miscue does not sound right or make sense, but within her zone of development, she is unable to monitor the mispronunciation on her own. She needs help monitoring and correcting for a different reason, she does not yet control the different pronunciations of this word; Sally would be unable to monitor her own reading in order to signal to herself that her reading did not sound right or make sense. All of the students in these vignettes needed help monitoring and correcting for accuracy, but for very different reasons.

*Help Monitoring and Correcting for Fluency*

Following along on this continuum of helping behavior, monitoring and correcting for fluency occurred, but much less frequently. The fact that it happened as often as it did, I think, directly relates to the task. Very rarely do I hear students correct other students for proper fluency in other situations; I think that it occurred here due to the purpose of the reader’s theater groups. Their reading of the script needed to help an audience create meaning. Helping with fluency happened when the readers involved both controlled the needed reading behaviors to understand and correct fluency. Only the most proficient readers were a part of these interactions pertaining to fluency; more specifically, with the exception of one interaction, it
always occurred with the older friend being the person to offer help. Help with fluency fell into two main themes; help with pausing and help with expression. This next excerpt looks at how Amy helps Mark with pausing.

"Straw, bits of woods, even hair from a man's beard!"

Ray, playing one of Edison's assistants, talks about some of the thousand things they have tried to use as a conductor for the light bulb.

"Time is running out people! Will..." Mark responds with the next line.

"No, no" Amy moves forward towards Mark to help him read the line correctly. "It's like, time is running out. People..."

"Time is running out. People will laugh at us on December 31st." Mark continues on with the line while Amy moves back to her spot.

This snippet from one of the reader's theater groups helps highlight how the students help monitor each other's reading for proper pausing. Amy, described before, an older friend and the highest reader in the class, realized that Mark's reading of the script would confuse the listeners. She knew that it needed to be corrected in order to maintain the purpose of the reader's theater groups, reading a script so that an audience could understand. She modeled for Mark and then he made his own attempt. The group continued and when Mark came to that spot again in future readings, he
read the phrase with the correct pausing. Amy was able to correct and model the correct pausing, and Mark was able to fix it and then continuously apply it in future reading. This interaction was successful because both readers understood the purpose of the task, but beyond that, they both understood this complex reading behavior.

The other aspect of fluency that students helped with was reading with expression. For reader’s theater, emphasis and intonation are important aspects of the task. Reading a particular word or phrase with improper intonation could greatly affect the meaning of the script. The following is an interaction between Jamie, a very strong reader as an older friend, and Ian, a strong reader as a younger friend.

“It’s a fox.” Ian reads with the emphasis on the word ‘fox’, but the intonation and expression does not help the listener understand that Ian is happy to be answering a question from his teacher.

Jamie whispers, “Ian. Like, like “it’s a...” Ray, another student in the group, starts reading his line. Jamie, not wanting to disrupt the group, continues to mouth the rest of the sentence showing the excitement on her face and through her hands waving through the air.

The next day, Jamie tries to remind Ian of their conversation that took place the previous day on reading the line with expression. “Ian, remember, it’s a fox! It’s a fox!”
This interaction, just like the previous interaction between Mark and Amy, occurred between two students who were developmentally ready to have this conversation about fluency. Jamie knew that Ian, although a younger friend, would be able to take her help, understand it, and apply it to future readings. Other students in Jamie’s group over the five week study made similar errors, but she did not correct them. For example, Ray makes an error in fluency, specifically pausing. Although this is a different type of error in fluency, it is very similar and requires similar skills and abilities. Jamie makes no effort to correct it even though she previously corrected Ian for a similar fluency mistake.

“Can we talk about camels? Look at the picture of this one!” Ian reads his line as one of the students.

“It’s my turn! It has a long winter coat and it humps...” Ray reading his line, taking a long pause here at the incorrect spot.

“Ohhh...” Jamie can’t stop giggling and looking at Ray.

“Stand straight up. Camels live in hot and cold deserts.” Ray reads the rest of the line and the group continues on.

Ray’s error in pausing does not make sense or sound right in the story. It greatly changes the meaning of the script. Jamie’s giggling indicated that she understood the error that Ray made. Ray, even with Jamie’s giggling, did not realize
an error was made. Even if Jamie provided help, I don’t think Ray would have been able to understand or adapt his reading based on the help. Either Jamie knew this or did not want to have the conversation on what the error was. Either way, for whatever reason, she didn’t correct it even though it impacted the meaning.

Once again, this links back to the person offering and receiving help both were able to understand the help being offered. The way that Jamie chose when to intervene and help is truly based on perceptions. It reflects not only her perception of herself as a reader and teacher within our classroom, but also the perception she has of the other student as a reader and learner within our classroom. When she attempts to help another classmate, she views that student as a capable reader and proficient enough to understand the help she can give. For example, Jamie helps Ian correct his reading for better fluency. This interaction reveals that Jamie felt that she and Ian were strong enough readers to understand this aspect of fluency; viewing both her and Ian as proficient readers. In contrast, Jamie does not help Ray with his fluency error; viewing him as a less capable reader. Any situation that involves students helping one another reflects many different perceptions. First, the person offering help must have positive perceptions of his or herself as a reader. Second, the person must also have a positive perception of the person that he or she is helping. The person offering help must believe that the person receiving help is able use and understand the help and therefore benefit from the interaction. Our multiage classroom does not only shape perceptions about oneself as a reader, but also perceptions of one another.
Help Maintaining the Task

The final, and most complicated, type of help dealt with refocusing the group to read the script and practice it more than once. This type of help occurred frequently over the course of the study and within each session. Although all of the students needed redirection, reminders, or gestures to get back on task, almost all of the help doing so came from the older friends. Let’s look at how Mark helped redirect the group to get back to practicing the script correctly.

“Nah, let’s just throw it all away. What’s the big deal about trash?” Mark reads his line.

“The landfills that hold our trash get full. Ya, like baby!” Gus read his line, doing a little improvisation at the end.

“Does it say it” Mark asks looking frantically back and forth between his script and Gus’ script. He is very confused and concerned for the task.

“No!” Kim laughs.

“Then just go. Don’t say that!” Mark tells Gavin and the group continues the script as written.

Here is another example of how Mark and Allison attempt to get Amy to stop confusing the group and getting them off task.

“Oh my turn! Thomas you were...” Ray starts to read his line correctly.
“It’s Th-omas!” Amy chimes in, pronouncing Thomas incorrectly and laughing.

“I said Thomas.” Ray replies beginning to be frustrated.

“It’s Th-omas!” Amy repeats. “Like Th-omas Jefferson.”

Mark turns to Amy, “Ok. You just worry about yourself.”

“Just say Thomas.” Gus tells Ray shaking his head up and down.

The group continues on reading the lines and the name Thomas correctly, but Amy doesn’t stop the inappropriate behavior.

“A few weeks later, Edison is still in his lab. Finally he has a breakthrough! Da, da, da, daa!” Amy sings, improvising the last part of the line.

Allison turns around and whispers, “Stop it!”

In the previous two examples, Mark and Allison were able to divide their attention between reading the script and monitoring the task. They had to stop reading along with the text, take their eyes away from the place on the page, and then deal with the situation of getting the group back on task. This is a very complex behavior and required a proficient network of reading and thinking strategies to read the script.
so that more attention can be freed to help others stay on task. Many of the younger friends were often unaware of off task behavior because so much of their attention was put into following the script and decoding. This type of help was mostly limited to the older friends for this reason and a few others. Besides the complex network of reading strategies, the older friends are simply another year older and more mature. My older students tend to be more focused and attentive in learning situations. Throughout our reader’s theater groups, the older friends followed along closely with the script and helped the group stay on task. Their attention, focus, and maturity allowed them to help maintain the task better. The older friends have another distinct advantage that is unrelated to reading ability or maturity. The older students have a whole other year of experience in our classroom. They know my expectations of group work and instructional time. It’s not that the younger friends don’t know what it looks like, sounds like, and feels like to work appropriately during reader’s theater groups; but the older friends have more experience and guidance with appropriate behavior and expectations in reader’s theater groups. They have seen what happens when expectations are and are not followed within the group. They have a better understanding of our classroom and my expectations. I think that these three factors greatly impacted why older friends were the only students to help maintain the task.

_Somehow, Everyone Helped_

All students felt that they could help another member of our learning community. Often in my primary classroom, students think that they can do a lot of things that don’t quite come to life in the way that they thought. I was very surprised
to see their actions match their words. Every student in some way, at some point helped another student with either a literacy behavior or an on-task behavior. To me, that means that each student perceives him or herself as a capable reader in his or her own way. To take a risk and help a peer in the group shows that you are self confident as a reader, as a teacher, and as a valuable member of our learning community. Children valued themselves and the knowledge they possessed in such a way that they felt another student could benefit from their help. That is an extremely powerful view of oneself.

Now, not all students could help in the same ways; a lot of the types of help related to what reading skills, abilities, and strategies each individual child controlled. I originally thought that’s what mattered- what skills the child had and how some must feel badly because they were at such drastically different levels. My students helped me understand that the act of helping another student in the class really represents a student’s perception of oneself as a reader, learner, and teacher, not just the literacy skills they can help with. Each student’s interview response to how to help a classmate and their actions matched up.

*How to Help*

Although all students were able to give help somehow, the way that they offered help varied greatly. There were very few distinctions between the type of help older friends and younger friends offered; most help related to reading ability. However, the way that older friends and younger friends offered help looked very different. Specifically, the difference in proximity and volume varied greatly. This
vignette reflects the varying ways that older friends and younger friends offer help.

Allison, an older friend, is attempting to offer Sally help. She is unable to move near Sally, so she is trying to switch places with Ian, who is a younger friend.

As Sally tries to read her lines, Ian and Allison are trying to help. Allison is doing most of the helping, but Ian is the closest. Sally struggles through her line, “What are gliders?” Allison, realizing that Sally needs some more support, starts to ask Ian if she can move towards Sally. She covers her face with the paper and whispers and points to Sally and then back to herself. The rest of the group continues on without noticing. Ian and Allison continue this conversation in between reading lines and continuing to help Sally.

For Allison to offer help, she needed to move near the person who she is trying to help. It was common for older friends to move near the people they were helping. The younger friends would just help from where they were and yell to the person, even if it was across the group. The following sections highlight these differences further.

Younger Friends

One of the main differences in how the older friends and younger friends offered help was in volume. The younger friends were much louder when helping.
Often times, the younger friends would literally yell across the group in order to offer help. Here an example of a younger friend offering help.

"Let's make it into a bird feeder!" Gus reads his line.

Kim asks whose turn it is. Gus' line continues, but he is unaware since he flipped to the wrong page.

"You're on the wrong page!" Lorie yells across from the other side of the group. She is pointing to the correct line on her script.

Lorie offers Gus help with navigating the text. She is able to offer help because she understood the task as well as the related literacy behaviors. This type of help was very common amongst older and younger friends. The way in which she offered help was unique to the younger friends. Lorie's yelling across the group was loud and distracting. Her disruptive way of offering help was extremely typical of younger friends. They would yell across the group or flail their papers around to show the correct spot. They made no effort to move toward the person in order to help more effectively. The younger friends always remained in the same spot when they were offering help, no matter whom they were helping or where that person was.

Even when the younger friends offered help to a neighbor, the younger friends were still loud. They would talk loudly, grab papers, and even their whispers were like raspy shouts. The younger friend's way of helping was much less conducive to the task and, at some points, was even embarrassing. It took the group's attention away from the task. It stopped the entire group's work and made it hard for the group
to continue on while the younger friend was offering help. It also highlighted someone who was not doing something correctly. Due to the volume, the entire group was made aware of the fact that someone needed help and was unable to complete the task accurately. This was embarrassing to watch, let alone be a part of. At certain points, the tone and volume of the younger friends contained little empathy and compassion for the person receiving help. The younger friend’s help was effective in terms of helping with a particular skill; however, it was not effective in promoting the task or positive interactions within the group.

Older Friends

This way of helping differs greatly from the way in which we saw the older friends offer help. This excerpt shows two older friends, Allison and Hillary, quietly offering help to a younger friend.

“Is... Is... the...” Sally starts to read her line. She pauses for a while.

Allison, standing next to Sally, leans in closely and whispers so quietly that you can barely hear her. “when... machine.”

“Is the when machine...” Sally makes a second attempt at her line again.

Hillary, two people away from Sally, leans in across the group to get closer to Sally. She whispers the rest of her line quietly to Sally, “ready”. 
“Ready,” Sally repeats, finishing her line.

This is one of the many examples on how older friends offered help during the reader’s theater groups. Allison and Hillary are able to offer Sally help and Sally is able to receive help because all three are able to understand the task and the literacy behavior. This was not an uncommon type of help. The way that Allison and Hillary offered help to Sarah is intriguing.

Throughout the study, I saw older friends offering help quietly and without distracting the whole group. Often times I couldn’t even hear the older friends when they were offering help. Just as in the example above, Allison and Hillary were almost inaudible; I only knew that they were offering help because I could see them moving around and talking. Other times, the older friends would whisper to others when they offered help. Very rarely did an older friend yell or even talk normally to another student in the group when offering help. The help was quiet, respectful, and discrete. In order to continue this quiet way of helping, older friends often moved in order to offer help. They would move toward or next to the person who needed help. The older friends keep a close proximity to those who they are trying to help. The only time an older friend offered help loudly or in front of the group was when it dealt with managing the task, and it usually applied to more than one person or the whole group. The older friends could distinguish when personalized help was appropriate for individual skills and when multiple people needed the same type of help.
The quiet nature of the older friends reflects our learning community. I will typically ask older friends to help, especially towards the beginning of the year. They know the expectations, routines, and content that they younger friends have yet to completely control. I have structured how to offer help respectfully and quietly. I ask them to go help other students by sending them off to a quiet place to work or having them go over to the student to help. I would never allow or accept an older friend offering help by yelling across the room or helping across the table; just as when I offer individual help, I go to the person to help. The older friends have internalized this behavior and now apply it to other helping situations. Specifically, in the reader’s theater groups, the older friends offered help in a way that did not disrupt the group or call attention to the person that they were helping.

Looking back at the opening vignette for this section, it is clear that the older friends and younger friends have very different ways of offering help. Ian could not understand why Allison would need or want to move closer to Sally. In his mind, as a younger friend, Allison should just help Sally from where she was currently standing. He could not understand that being closer might help more effectively. The confusion and discussion between Allison and Ian reflect the differences in the ways that older friends and younger friends deem it appropriate to offer help.

*How Do We Learn How to Help?*

The previous two sections of this chapter look at types of help and how help was offered. Definite patterns started to emerge related to the topic of helping. It was clear the types and ways in which students were offering help. The clear patterns that
emerged caused me to wonder and explore further why older friends helped in a quieter way, why students helped if it impacted meaning or the task, and how students knew when their help would be effective or not. I turned to the routines and structures of our learning community, as well as the student interviews, to explore these wonderings further. I started to see that students developed norms and standards for helping through modeling, structure and routine, and experience.

Modeling

One of the main ways in which students learn when, where, and how to help is through modeling. I spent a lot of time throughout the year structuring situations for students to offer and receive help. I see all of my students as valuable resources, especially my older friends. They often become mini-extensions of myself; helping in similar ways, tones, and mannerisms. I can see myself within their helping situations because I have spent a great deal of time modeling to students various ways to help.

I do a lot of modeling with the older friends especially at the beginning of the year. I’ll model routines, expectations, or new learning experiences to both older and younger friends. Then I’ll send the new students off with an older friend as a buddy to help them practice those routines. Since the older friends already have experienced these classroom rituals, they can offer help to the new younger friends. I expect the older friends to extend the younger friends’ learning through the help that they provide; offering feedback, suggestions, and positive reinforcement is imperative. I often see the older friends mimicking me, helping in the same ways that I have modeled. The older friends take on my phrases, intonation, and questioning
techniques and I see seeing them becoming more independent and self confident, in regard to helping, through my modeling and scaffolding.

Sometimes these helping situations don’t go as perfectly as described above, either due to the older friend offering help or the younger friend receiving help. I have had to interject myself into groups where the older friend is offering ineffective help, where no help is being offered, or where the situation is not helpful to either the younger or older friend. In those cases, I go over and reflect upon the interaction with the younger and older friends, focusing about how well they think it is going, how they are feeling, and how they might make it work better. If that does not yield a positive helping experience, I will actually take the place of the younger friend or older friend that is not cooperating or helping effectively and model what the appropriate action would look like. My modeling, feedback, and monitoring is not limited to just the beginning of the year; it continues throughout the year and in all interactions. These interactions are rich opportunities for students to learn about help.

In addition to myself as a model, the older friends had another effective set of role models for offering help; last year, they had an entire class of older friends when they were younger friends. The older friends have learned how to help through interaction with their older peers last year. As previous younger friends, my new older friends have been able to receive help from their older peers. I think that it is much less intimidating to follow the model that is set forth by their peers than to follow in my footsteps. The current older friends were able to take on the characteristics and mannerisms of the previous older friends through their interactions
last year. Unfortunately, our kindergarten class is a traditional, single graded classroom; therefore did not allow for my current first grade age students to have had a positive older peer influence on their helping behavior.

The older friends have a tremendous impact on my classroom and, more generally, within a lot of multiage classrooms. Having an extra year of modeling and experience with me and older peers proved to be effective; the older friends were much more effective helpers than the younger friends. Although all students have had a lot of opportunities to observe how to help, most of my time, resources, and learning situations have been structured to aid in developing strategies and skills for older friends to offer help and for younger friends to receive help effectively and respectfully.

Structures and Routines

Beyond modeling, another key component to how members of our learning community learn how to help revolves around the structures and routines that I have set in place. I value each member of our learning community and try to convey that to students through the structures and routines that I have in place. For example, I require students to go to each other for help before they come to me and I structure my literacy centers so that students have peers they can go to for help. These structures and routines place value and emphasis on student help within the classroom.

A familiar saying in my classroom is ‘three before me’. I teach students how to help appropriately through this phrase. When I am busy or working with students
individually or in a small group, my students know to go ask three friends who they think can help before coming to me. This rule specifically applied to reader’s workshop, but now is generalized to all parts of the day. We have spent a great deal of time exploring what this might look like, sound like, and feel like within reader’s workshop. Additionally, time was spent discussing and role playing how to look for someone who is already following the directions or looks like they might know what to do. Students really respect this rule and try to live by it. It is evident by the interviews. Most students replied that they would come to me for help, but if I was busy then they would try someone in the class. For example, Allison said that she would come to me first, but if I was busy or with a group, then she could go to Jamie or Amy. Similar responses came from multiple other students. Going to other students in the class is not something that happens by chance; it is built into the routines and culture of the classroom through the ‘three before me’ rule of the classroom.

In addition to the ‘three before me’, how I structure our literacy centers also plays a significant role in how students learn to help. I designed my literacy center groups to be a heterogeneous grouping of students; allowing students of different grade levels and reading abilities to intermix to practice and reinforce skills independently or with a buddy. I chose this particular grouping so that students would be able to help each other. Having students of different abilities, knowledge, and skills fosters greater development and a helping atmosphere. Prior to starting our literacy centers, we talked a great deal about how other students in our group could be a valuable resource during literacy centers. The ways that we thought their group
members could help ranged from help with the technology at the center, help with the
directions or task at the center, help with solving a problem with reading or otherwise,
a buddy to work with, and many more. The type of help was not limited to just help
with reading or comprehending; I think that is why many students indicated to me
during the interviews that they could go to anyone in their literacy center group for
help. For example, Allison said that she could go to any of the three people in her
literacy center group because they were all working on the same things. Similarly,
Jake said that he would go to any of the members in his group because they all would
know how to help. This grouping of students is just one of many structures in my
classroom that helps develop helping skills and strategies for students within our
learning community. They are able to feel comfortable and effective at offering and
receiving help in their particular groups and start to generalize that to other situations.
It validates that all students are able to help and can be a valuable resource in our
classroom.

These structures and routines have turned seeking out, receiving, and offering
help into an integral part of the day; they almost make it a required and needed aspect
of our learning community. I have set up these situations to allow students to see
themselves and others as powerful resources within the classroom. To offer or receive
help becomes almost intrinsic within our classroom because of them.

Experience

The final way in which students develop norms and standards for helping is
purely through experience. Students gain skills, knowledge, and strategies on offering
and receiving help through actual helping interactions. Their previous academic and helping experiences both aid in developing and understanding of offering and receiving help in our learning community. Both pieces work together in order to effectively offer and receive help.

In order to offer or receive help, students need to have experiences or have developed the academic skills, knowledge, and content. For students to be able to offer help to another student, they must understand what they are helping with. As the first sections highlighted, only some students were developmentally ready to offer some of the more advanced help like monitoring and correcting for fluency or accuracy or help with maintaining the task. The person offering help with monitoring and correcting for fluency needed to possess the skills and knowledge to recognize there was a miscue and then to help fix it. The same is true for other types of help; the person offering help needed to possess the skills, content, and knowledge in order to help.

A second important point on having previous experience for offering and receiving help ties into the experiences of receiving help. The person receiving help needs to understand the skills, knowledge, and content related to the task and help too. A helping situation where the person receiving help does not understand the help they are getting would not be helpful or effective. The first section highlighted both cases, where the person receiving help understood and did not understand the skills, knowledge, and content to receive help. The first was much more effective. Students possessing the needed skills, knowledge, and content grew and developed out of the
interaction; working within the known makes receiving help more appropriate within our learning community.

These two points are important and integral to how offering and receiving help is developed within our classroom. When I have students seek out help, I direct them to find someone who they think can help. They have to make a determination on who they think can help them. Their perceptions of their own and other skills, content, and knowledge comes into play. I offer suggestions of people or qualities that many be helpful; I think that students generalize these conversations and are thoughtful about who they go to for help. Similarly, I think that students pick up on who and what I help with. They reflected how I would help in the reader’s theater group; the older friends especially, offered the type of help and in the way that I would have. Students use their actual skills, content, and knowledge as well as the perceived skills, content, and knowledge of others to offer and receive help.

In addition to academic experiences, students draw upon previous helping experiences to construct knowledge on how to offer and receive help in our learning community. Each new helping interaction allows all students involved to develop more skills and strategies to offer and receive help. More practice allows students to be more effective and productive. Since offering and receiving help are reciprocal processes, students can practice doing one, but also gain insight into the other. By this I mean that students can receive help and gain skills and strategies to receive that help, apply it, and learn from it. That’s not all though; students can also learn how to
offer help through the modeling of other people in the interaction. Students gain skills and strategies for offering and receiving help in each interaction.

With all of this being said, it is clear to see why the older friends have a distinct advantage. Having an extra year of school and in our classroom, they have had access to more modeling, more experiences, and have had the opportunity to construct more academic knowledge and skills and strategies to offer help. The students in the class really value this additional expertise and experiences. It is clear through the students’ actions and answers to the interview questions. Students would regularly go to older friends for help. Also, in the interview questions, students said that they would go to older friends for help. They gave further reasons for why they would choose an older friend. Typical responses included

*The older friends are able to read bigger and longer books*- Mark

*That the older friends have helped before and they did a good job*- Lorie and Gus

*The older friends have been the in classroom for two years and have had a chance to learn more things*- Allison

*Seeing the older friends read a lot and books that are harder than mine*- Ian

The students in the class value the older friends’ previous academic and helping experiences.

**What Does This Mean for Our Classroom**

The ways in which my students engage in offering and receiving help reflects our learning community. Our learning community has socially constructed norms and
standards for offering and receiving help. We have constructed these through modeling, routines and structures, and experiences. How we socially construct ways and types of helping is unique to our classroom this year. Each of our personal experiences and interactions has shaped the way that we help in our learning community. The difference in our classroom, as well as other multiage classrooms, is that our helping interactions are further shaped by previous older friends. Our helping behavior evolves over time based on needs and the factors described above, but there is still always a link to past students since students stay in the classroom for two years. Our current helping behavior is shaped by the past and will impact my future learning communities.

On the outside of Socially Constructed Norms

The previous section highlighted how members of our classroom have constructed norms and standards for offering help within our classroom. These norms and standards were developed through modeling, structures and routines, and experiences. Students gained skills and strategies through time spent interacting in helping situations within our classroom. Students who do not spend a full two years in our classroom or never are at the receiving end of a helping situation are at a significant disadvantage. Those who miss out on both almost seem out of place within our learning community. These students do not develop the same standards for help as the rest of the group.

Last year, I had two students enter my classroom halfway through the year. Their entrance into our classroom came in February of their first grade year. They
quickly adjusted to being younger friends within our classroom. Even though they
adjusted well, they missed out on half of a year of helping interactions. They both
missed out on what it was like to be a younger friend at the beginning of the year,
what it felt like to be helped by the older friends, what structures and routines were in
place to aid in helping, and what it is like for me to assist in helping situation. Now
granted, they didn't miss out on it completely; both students were able to be a part of
these interactions for the last part of the year, but not to the extent that the others in
the class were able to for the full year.

In addition to the actual time and experiences that these two students missed,
Amy, one of the two students, missed out on helping experience in another big way.
As discussed in the previous section, one of the main ways of developing strategies
and skills for offering help is through receiving help. Amy came into the classroom in
February of last year as my highest reader, even above the older friends. She a
perpetual loner within the classroom; she is always receiving reading and other
literacy instruction individually from me. She has had even less helping interactions
because of this. Amy was rarely on the receiving end of any helping interaction
because she didn't usually need it. On top of that, she has had less group interactions
than the rest of the students in our learning community because she is always working
individually with me.

Previous examples have highlighted the quiet, respectful way that older
friends offer help. They have developed strategies and skills for helping through
modeling, structures and routines, and experiences. Let’s look at how Amy offers help and interacts with the other students in her group.

“Mrs. Cook began to ask about Kangaroos,” Jamie reads her line as a narrator.

The group begins to flip to the next page of the script. There is a lot of confusion within the group as to where the next line is. Jamie tells the group that they are on page five with student three being the next speaker.

“Who is it?” Amy yells across the group to Jamie. “We are on page five!” She continues to yell at Ray who is sitting right next to her. She snatches his paper out of his hands to get him on the right page and yells at him again that the group is on page five.

The interaction ends with Amy throwing her hands up in the air and shaking her head. She sighs, “This is definitely not working!”

Amy does not help like a typical older friend would. She is yelling at the other members of the group and she is physically disrespectful to Ray by grabbing the paper out of his hand. Her tone and mannerisms are not supportive or even really helpful. At this point in the year, I would not even expect my younger friends to help in this way. In the end, she is so disgusted and annoyed that it is not going the way that she wants it to that she throws her hands up in the air. This excerpt is from our first day of this research study. Amy becomes extremely frustrated when things don’t come easy to her or when she is not right the first time. This is a prime example of
that. Those who have developed the skills and strategies to offer help have learned that to help effectively they might have to help the same person with the same type of help more than once. In the rare occasions that Amy needs help, she can usually understand it right away. She doesn’t understand what it feels like to need multiple interactions or encounters in order to understand something; therefore she cannot empathize with those who do. It is not that Amy cannot offer help, she has the academic skills, content, and knowledge in order to do so; she just doesn’t offer help effectively because she has not developed skills and strategies through receiving help from others.

Similarly, Amy doesn’t like to make mistakes or be incorrect. She gets upset whether someone corrects her or not, just the fact that she made a miscue and she is aware of it is enough to get her upset.

Amy reads her line as Mrs. Cook, the teacher. She is very sarcastic and dramatic in her reading. “Let’s talk about the largest land animal alive, again. I don’t know what it is, but... What it is it.”

Amelia miscues on the last part of the line.

Ian, the next speaker starts his line. “An elephant of...”

Before he can finish his line, Amy punches him in the shoulder and then continues to read the last part of her line correctly.

Most of the students are able to receive help correcting a miscue respectfully and appropriately. Most of the students are able to self correct a miscue respectfully and appropriately. Not Amy; she actually hits Ian in order to stop him from going any
further so she could correct her line. Her interactions in the group are often disrespectful and inappropriate whether she is helping herself or another person. This links back to not having opportunities to be a part of helping interactions, specifically interactions where Amy received help, and not wanting to make a miscue. If Amy gets annoyed offering help to others, then most likely she will think other people view helping in a similar way. She would not want help from others and would be embarrassed to have to need it. Plus she would not like to have to admit that she made a miscue or did not understand something. I think a lot of this stems from rarely being on the receiving end of a helping interaction.

Countless other interactions in previous sections and throughout the research study highlight Amy’s inappropriate and disrespectful way of helping. She has missed out on a lot of positive helping experiences to aid in her development of skills and strategies to offer help. Amy is a prime example of how knowing just the academic skills, content, and knowledge is not enough in a helping interaction; a person must also possess the needed skills and strategies to offer or receive help.

Clear patterns and themes developed out of the analysis of the data collected in this study. These themes were that students offered different types of help based on a variety of factors, older friends and younger friends helped in different ways, and students within the learning community socially constructed these norms and standards for helping. These findings demonstrate how students have positive perceptions of themselves and others as readers during the reader’s theater groups.
These findings as related to impact on the classroom and future research will be discussed further in following chapter.
Chapter #5

Summary, Conclusion, and Recommendations

Summary and Conclusions

The results of this study suggest that students within my particular multiage classroom, overall, have positive perceptions of themselves and others as developing readers. The fourteen students in my classroom participated in multilevel reader’s theater groups as part of our balanced literacy program. During this research study, I interviewed each student to collect data on perceptions, roles and interactions within our multiage classroom, as well as the structures and routines as they pertained to reading. The students then participated in the reader’s theater groups twice a week for five weeks. The groups were either observed by me or were videotaped for future analysis. Through the process of data analysis, themes and patterns began to emerge; specifically in the type of help that was offered, in the way that students offered help, and in the ways students developed an understanding of how to help within our learning community.

The findings of this study provided firsthand experience into the ways that students socially construct expectations and knowledge. Throughout my educational career, I was exposed to the great body of work on historical and social constructivism by Vygotsky (Vygotsky, 1997) and other educational researchers and professionals. The findings of this study are consistent with the learning theories presented by these researchers and professionals. Students socially constructed the standards and norms for helping within our learning community. Within the multiage
structure of our classroom, the current standards and norms have also been influenced by the past as well.

The ways in which students offer and receive help are a reflection of our learning community comprised of fifteen, fourteen students and myself as the teacher. The fifteen of us have socially constructed these norms and standards for offering and receiving help through modeling by a more capable peer, structures and routines, and experiences with our classroom. One of the premises of social constructivism is that all individuals are active participants in the creation of knowledge and understanding (Moll, 1990). All fifteen of us were active participants within our social system, either by developing and constructing meaning from the reader’s theater scripts or in the ways that we offer and receive help. Students learn from social interactions with an expert peer or adult (Goodman & Goodman, 1990). Understanding, skills, and strategies were all influenced and developed throughout the experience pertaining to both literacy and helping interactions; the collaboration in the reader’s theater groups did not only promote development and mastery of reading behaviors, but also in the ways in which help was offered and received.

These norms and standards for helping have also been influenced by the past ‘generations’ of students in our learning community. At the onset of each new year, there is always a link to past students and therefore past practices, routines, understanding, and knowledge. This link evolves and changes as the year goes on, but the link to the past is always there due to the multiage aspect of our classroom. Students in our learning community now have been affected and influenced by these
conceptual ideals. The cultural mediation that occurs within my classroom is unique to multiage classrooms. Students are affected by ideals and materials within our classroom that have been shaped, developed, and transformed by previous groups of students (Cole, 1990). This mediation is unique to multiage classrooms because there is an inherent link to previous years that is not present in single graded classrooms.

This study is fairly unique within the large body of research pertaining to multiage education. This qualitative study on the perceptions of reading development within a multiage classroom fails to link directly to another study on multiage education. Until very recently, researchers have tried to compare students within a traditional and multiage educational structure. The intent of this study was not to identify which organizational system was better; the purpose was to explore how students perceive themselves within this environment.

The findings of this study do support other studies in the field of education. McClellan and Kinsley (1997) found that students in multiage classrooms are more accepting of peers. This can be seen through my study in the way that students help others unconditionally with our learning community. The students never demonstrated teasing or rude behavior when someone needed help. The students in our learning community value and respect each other and their interactions reflect that.

Limitations

A few limitations regarding my study should be considered. First, the definition and implementation of a multiage program can vary greatly and represent many different
classrooms and educational programs. In the most basic form, a multiage classroom consists of students spanning at least two grade levels. The span can be two, three, or even more grade levels in one classroom. In my classroom, students span two grade levels, first and second grade. My students, being of different grades and ages, inherently bring a wide variety of experiences, knowledge, and abilities to our classroom. A classroom that spans more than two grade levels would offer even more diversity. The experiences, knowledge, and abilities of a five year old are drastically different than those of an 8 year old. This increased discrepancy of experiences, knowledge, and abilities might further affect the way in which students offer and receive help. Having a middle grade or age might impact the results also; by that I mean having students who are in their first, second, and third year in a certain classroom might affect how students offer and receive help or perceive their reading development. The findings from this study might not be consistent with a multiage classroom that spans three or four grade levels, nor a single graded classroom for that matter. The findings in this study may only be appropriate for someone teaching two grade levels in a multiage setting.

There are many reasons for the creation of multiage classrooms; some are by choice and others by need. Sometimes families are forced to send students to a multiage school or other times families have the choice to enroll their child in that setting. The support of administrators, families, and other teachers is imperative to a successful multiage classroom or program. I am fortunate to have voluntarily embarked on my teaching career in a multiage classroom with supportive families,
coworkers, and administrators. The school where I teach is a multiage school of choice created by faculty and staff who share a common philosophy that multiage education is most beneficial for students. The findings in this study may not be appropriate for teachers, students, or learning communities acting under other circumstances and conditions. The willingness of participants, resources, and support may greatly impact the findings of this study. The premise of the study is based on social constructivism, the environment of any other multiage classroom or program may drastically alter any findings from this study.

The study examined reader’s theater as one multiage grouping within the realm of reading and the larger academic day. Therefore this study is limited to helping interactions pertaining to one aspect of reading. This study does not take into account additional groupings or interactions during other areas of reading, literacy, or any other content area. Examining one portion of the larger reading instruction that takes place within our learning community may not be enough to conclude that students have positive perceptions of themselves and others as developing readers. Our reading and literacy instruction incorporates a great deal more than as described by our reader’s theater groups. Although positive findings were found related to students’ perceptions in this one type of multiage grouping, it is only one aspect of our daily literacy instruction and cannot represent students’ perceptions or development as readers.

The final limitation to the study reflects my role in this whole process. As the teacher of the multiage classroom participating in the study and the researcher, I had
an interesting and unique role. It was difficult for my students to view me in any other role other than their teacher. That is not detrimental to a teacher-action research study; however, when starting to look at the ways in which students offer and receive help, my presence greatly impacts the group. While I was observing a group and attempting to record field notes, students tended to offer less help and appeal to others less frequently. Why would they; they had me right there! Students would appeal to me for help even though I explained to them that my role in the group was just to watch. It was hard to break the pattern and crutch of coming to me for help. The groups did not yield the same results and authenticity that the videotaped group did. My authority and role as their adult teacher skewed how and when students offered and received help. It was impossible for me to remove myself from the role of teacher and helper within the classroom.

In contrast, the students in the groups that were recorded offered and received help more frequently. They had to; helping each other was a necessity because of the purpose of the task and a lack of teacher or adult guidance. These interactions were not as instructionally productive or the most appropriate or respectful interactions. The instructional productivity suffered greatly. As these students’ teacher, I would have prompted for decoding and better fluency. Just as any other learning experience in our learning community, I want the students to learn and to help them continue to build their repertoire of experiences, knowledge, and abilities. I saw many great teaching opportunities that I could have capitalized on, but was not able to in my role as researcher of this study. In terms of literacy development, these grouping without
my direct guidance lacked rigor. Also, there were times where the student interactions were disrespectful or inappropriate. Once again, as a teacher, I would have intervened in order to facilitate the interaction. In either situation, one of my roles suffered due to the nature of the study. It was not detrimental to the study, but it did impact the learning community and findings in a unique way.

The definition and implementation of multiage education, the narrow focus of this study, and my role as a teacher and researcher may have influenced the findings of this study.

Recommendations for Future Research

These limitations should be considered when planning for future related research studies. There is a need for more qualitative studies so that researchers can start to look for themes and patterns across the body of research. In order to do that, a clear definition of multiage education needs to be developed. Researchers need to fully describe the multiage learning environment so that themes and patterns can be viewed across similar classrooms and educational programs. Firming up the definition of multiage education or at least providing a rich description of the classroom would be powerful and important to the developing body of research.

In terms of extending the findings of this study, it is important to conduct similar studies in order to generalize patterns and themes across different classrooms, ages, and multiage programs. My study provides only one snapshot of my particular students at one given time. More studies need to be done in order to further validate
and confirm my findings. Similar studies need to explore students of different ages and within other academic and social groupings.

Students' ages and experiences play an important role in their developing perceptions. It would be interesting to explore this study, or a similar one, conducted with older students. The way that my students have constructed norms and standards for helping within our learning community could vary greatly from that of older, adolescent students. This population might construct norms and standards in their own learning community in a very different manner. The interactions and relationships that are developed and impacted by their mindset, emotions, and general dispositions could greatly alter the results of a similar study.

In addition to looking at other ages or grade levels, I would be curious to see the findings that resulted from similar studies within other academic and social groupings. Reader's theater is only one small part of our day; there are countless other academic and social interactions throughout the day. Looking at trends and patterns across academic areas may provide more reliable results. A student might just have a particular strength in performing reader's theater, but is not as comfortable with mathematics or science. I would be interested to see if helping patterns change or are different between the two academic areas. Also, groupings and interactions that are not related to content or academics could be another variation of this study that could further validate my findings.
**Recommendations for My Classroom**

The purpose of this study was not to make recommendations for future studies or to fill a void in the current body of research. The purpose was to explore a growing concern and curiosity. Most importantly, it was to develop and grow as a teacher. By developing my understanding of perceptions and interactions, I could support my students more effectively. The ultimate goal is that I take action based on my findings. This study enabled me to do just that.

The findings from this research study have greatly shaped my understanding of the students in our learning community. Further, this study has granted me an insight into the interactions within my classroom. Not only did I gain insight into a student’s perception of oneself, but also of other students within the learning community. All students had positive perceptions of themselves and of the other students in the helping interaction. This was a positive and significant finding. It is clear that the use of modeling, structures and routines, as well as students’ personal experiences are effective, but I need to develop them further.

To aid in fostering these positive perceptions and interactions, three main aspects of my learning community need to be addressed. First, all students must continue to have opportunities to help. When students are able to offer help, they feel like valuable members and resources within our learning community. This is a powerful role within our learning community. I was surprised to find that all students valued themselves in this way and actually offered help at some point during the study. I need to continue to help younger friends and struggling readers find an
opportunity to offer help. These students should have the same opportunities to help. By appealing to each student’s strength and interest, students can contribute as an expert and helper within the learning community. I need to create opportunities where younger students can help others in the class with skills and content that they have control over. Structuring these opportunities will need to be well thought out and an integral part of our classroom next year. This will continue to help foster positive perceptions of individuals and others.

The second aspect of our learning community that needs to be addressed is the amount of cross grade and ability level interactions that occur. Currently, for reading, students of different grade level and abilities to work together at literacy centers and these reader’s theater groups. Continuing these interactions and developing others is imperative in order to continue fostering positive student perceptions in our learning community. Working with students of different grade levels and abilities allows students to develop new strategies, perspectives, and insights that they would not normally access. All students benefit from cross grade level and ability interactions. I now want to take these literacy based findings and see if they generalize to other academic areas and times of my day. I think that these types of interactions will help foster positive perceptions as well. Continuing these interactions, as well as developing new opportunities for students to work together in reading, other literacy related activities, and across other academic areas, can only continue to support positive interactions and perceptions within our learning community.
The third aspect of the learning community that I need to look at is how I structure learning and helping experiences so that students who enter our classroom later in the year, those who do not need a lot of help or support to get through the day, or those who work primarily one on one with me, can have opportunities to participate in helping experience where they need to receive help. I learned a lot from looking at Amy’s interactions within the group. I was surprised to see how drastically different her behaviors, ways of helping, and general presence was from the other older friends in the group. As discussed before, a lot of factors contributed to her lack of respectful and effective help, but I think that I could have done a better job of structuring interactions where she needed to receive help. Whether this was upon her entrance into the classroom by increasing my modeling, explicit teaching, and feedback on help, pairing her with a buddy from an older class in order to receive help, or giving her more opportunities to work with her same aged peers during academic settings. Prior to conducting and reflecting upon this study, I didn’t understand the importance of providing opportunities to offer assistance. The students in this learning community have developed norms and standards for helping that she was not always a part of. I can’t place the blame on her; it’s my fault that I did not provide her the opportunities to be a part of this construction and common understanding. As Vygotsky indicates, the teacher needs to be the guide through which students actively create meaning (Vygotsky, 1997). I was not that guide for her in many ways. I have learned not only how students develop these perceptions of themselves and one another, but also the importance of being responsive to those
students who are on the outside of these socially constructed norms and standards for helping. For that reason alone, this research has greatly changed me as a teacher in whatever setting I might be teaching.

Based on the findings of this study, students in our multiage classroom have positive perceptions of themselves as developing readers.
References


Fosco, A. M., Schlesser, R., & Andal, J. (2004). Multiage programming effects on cognitive developmental levels and reading achievement in early elementary


Appendix A:

Student Interview Questions

Pseudonym: ___________________________ Date: __________

1. Who is a good reader that you know?

2. What makes him or her a good reader?

3. How could you help someone having trouble reading?

4. If you were having trouble reading, whom would you go to for help in our classroom? Why?

5. Pretend you are talking to a kindergartner in our school. How would you describe to a kindergarten friend what reading is like in our classroom?