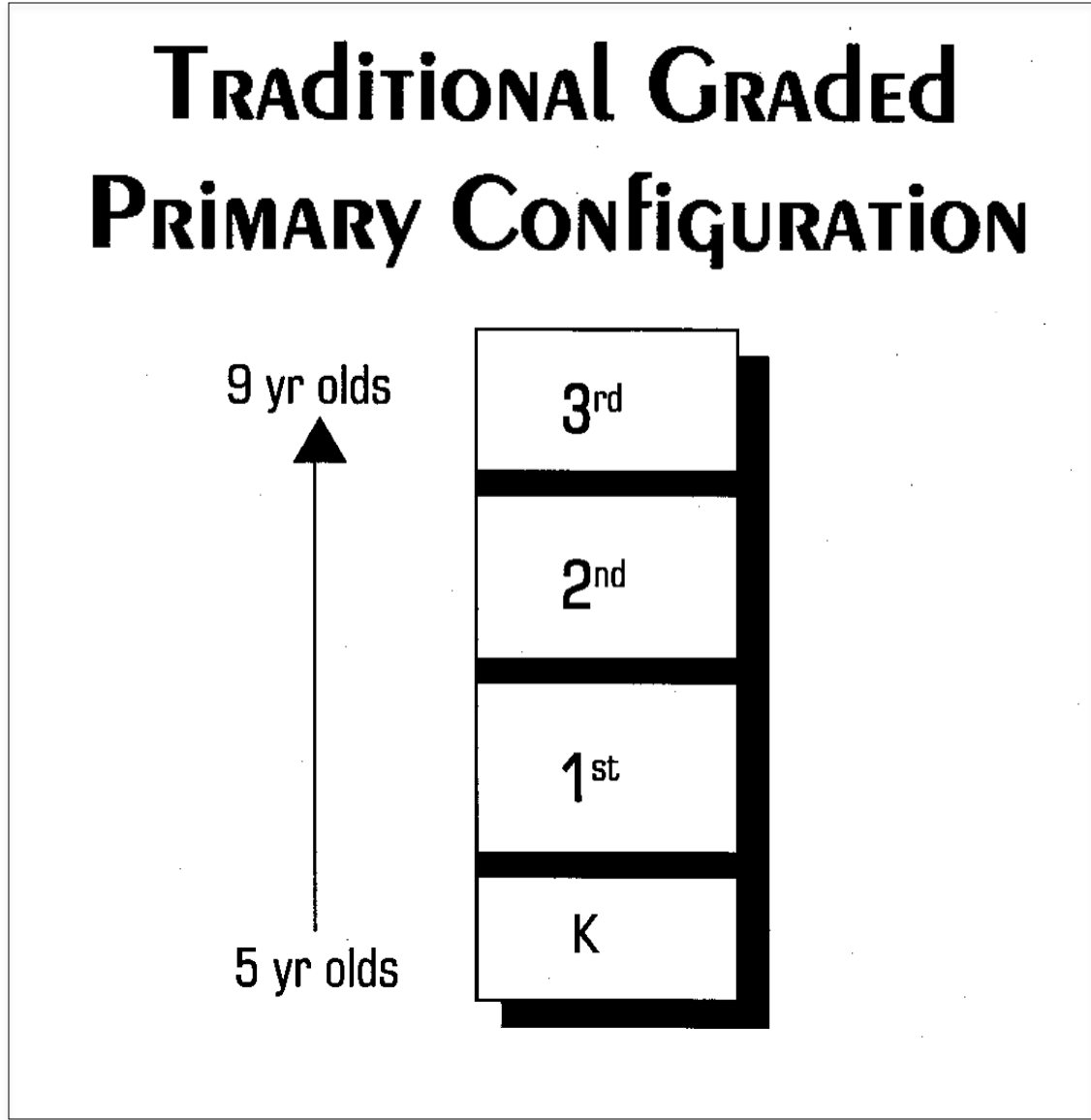
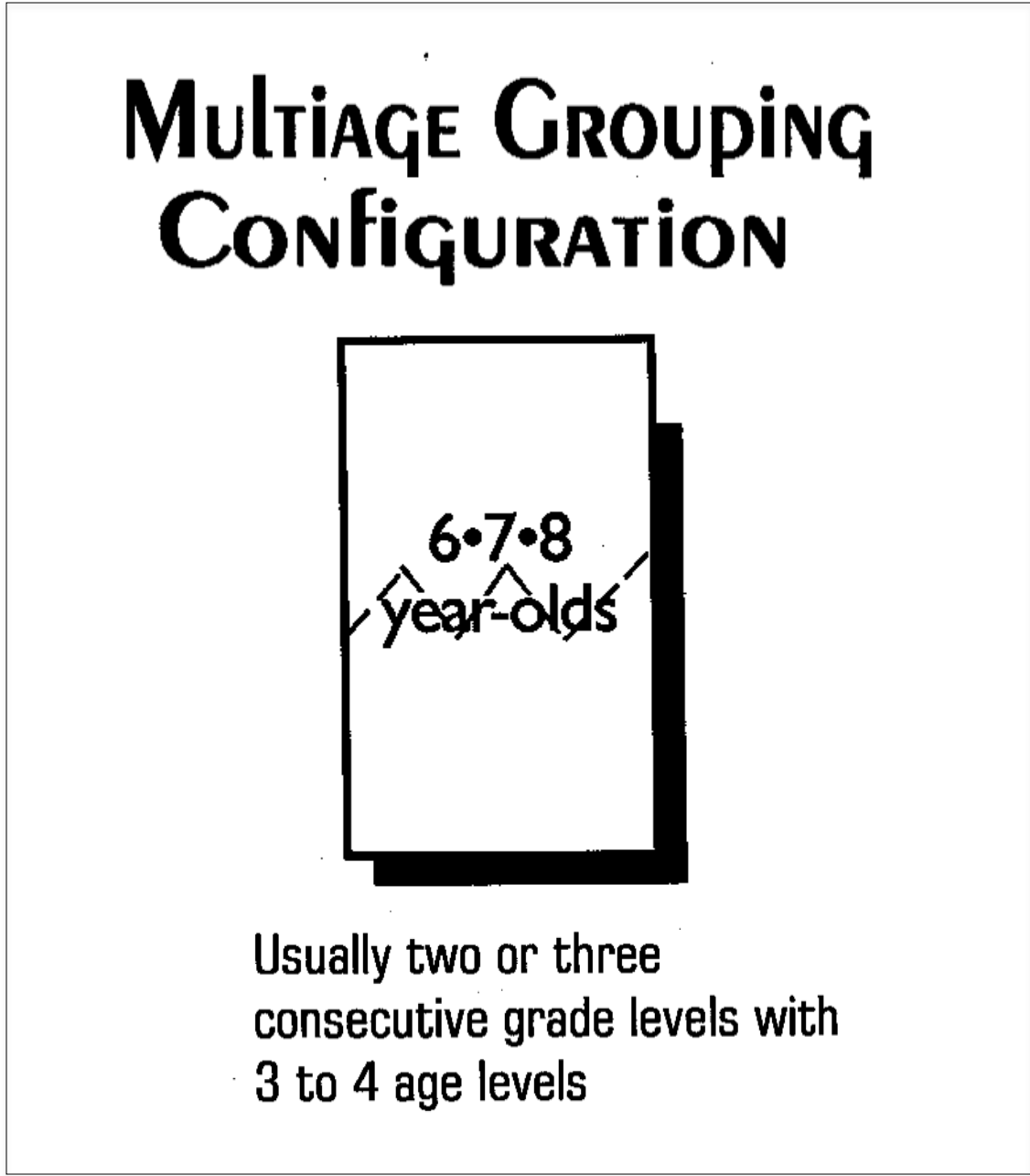


Assessing the Professional Development Needs of Special Area Teachers Working in Multi-age Elementary Environments

Background: Multi-age classrooms are defined by the intentional grouping of students from two or more grade levels for the purpose of creating cooperative communities of learners (Nishida, 2009). Students still progress from easier to difficult concepts, but each student moves at a developmental pace that is not strictly dictated by age or grade level. Multi-age instruction is often thematic in nature, utilizing concepts that connect to students’ interests and a variety of subject areas in an interdisciplinary manner (Bredhauer et al., 2006). Students often work cooperatively in pairs or groups, and the intention is to accentuate a collaborative rather than competitive atmosphere (Elkind, 1993).



The Research Problem: While research on multi-age education has existed for roughly five decades (Ball, 2006), the topic has rarely been addressed through the lens of *special area teachers* (such as art, music, and physical education instructors) who work at multi-age school sites. Although teachers preparing to work with mixed-age groups should have access to appropriate training and research on this topic, many teachers are assigned such mixed-grade groupings without training (Cornish, 2006) and there is some evidence that this may be particularly true for teachers of the arts (Broome, 2009). **The purpose of this research project is to utilize survey research to identify the professional development needs of special area teachers working at multi-age school sites.**



Methods and Guiding Research Questions: A survey questionnaire was developed and mailed to 1,021 special area teachers working in public elementary schools with multi-age classrooms. Due to the working conditions of public school teachers, the survey could not be administered until public school was back in session from summer break. 230 special area teachers (mostly art, music and P.E. teachers) returned completed surveys for a 22.53% response rate. The data is currently under analysis, with results applied to following research questions:

- What aspects of multi-age instruction are reported by surveyed multi-age special area teachers as areas in which professional development is most needed?
- What relationships exist between the needs of the surveyed multi-age special area teachers and the specific subject areas (visual art, music, physical education, etc.) that they teach?
- What formats and venues for multi-age professional development are perceived to be the most useful and preferred by the surveyed multi-age special area teachers?
- What barriers and incentives are there that would inhibit or facilitate the surveyed special area teachers’ participation in multi-age professional development experiences?

The Survey

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Please place a check in the appropriate boxes or fill in the blanks.

I. Background Information

1. Are you currently teaching at least one class organized as a multi-age group?

Yes No

If you answered no, do not proceed further. Please return your survey. Thank you for your time.

2. Are you a *special area teacher*, such as a visual art, music, or physical education instructor?

Yes No

If you answered no, do not proceed further. Please return your survey. Thank you for your time. If you answered yes, please check the subject area(s) that you teach.

Art
Music
Physical Education
Other, please describe _____

Future Related Research: The data from this research project can be used to plan future multi-age professional development experiences. These professional development workshops can be formulated as action research projects that help to fine-tune and improve the training until, hopefully, smaller sessions develop into larger symposia or a national training ground for multi-age art, music, and physical education teachers. I hope that the establishment of regular trainings on this topic will sustain my ongoing research on multi-age education and will lead to fruitful collaborations with other special area teachers.

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