

Snapshot #29

Implementing a Nongraded Elementary Program

**Konnoak Elementary School
Winston-Salem, North Carolina**

Kathleen Cotton

Nongraded education is the practice of teaching children of different age and ability levels together in the same classroom, without dividing them or the curriculum into steps labeled by "grade" designations.

-J. Gaustad, 1992

Research Findings

Once out of fashion and even disparaged, nongraded grouping for primary and sometimes upper-elementary students is once again being studied and implemented in many schools across the U.S. and Canada. The Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory's research "close-up," *Nongraded Primary Education* (April 1993) identifies research findings in support of nongraded-or "multiage"-grouping practices, including:

1. Nongraded grouping produces achievement outcomes which are at least equal and sometimes superior to those produced by traditional graded structures.
2. Compared to students educated in traditional graded arrangements, those in nongraded settings have more positive attitudes toward school, classmates, and teachers, as well as higher self-concepts as learners and higher general self-esteem.
3. Notable behavioral outcomes of nongraded grouping include greater social and leadership skill development, better school attendance, and markedly lower levels of aggression and other antisocial acts.
4. Nongraded grouping decreases the incidence of retention and improves relationships between parents and school personnel.
5. Nongraded settings are more congruent than single-grade grouping with the kinds of curricular content and learning activities that are developmentally appropriate for young children.

This last point calls for some elaboration. Research on developmentally appropriate education for young children has identified an array of practices that support the way these children grow and learn. Researchers identify nongraded grouping as one element of developmentally appropriate practice and recommend its use in conjunction with others, including:

- School staff acceptance of and respect for individual differences in children's developmental stages, abilities, learning styles, and interests
- Curriculum that is integrated in such a way that traditional subject matter knowledge is gained through involvement with learning centers and projects organized around themes
- Curricular activities focused on developing the child's physical, social, emotional, and intellectual well being, self-esteem, and positive regard for learning
- Curricular materials that are concrete, real, and relevant to children's lives
- Active, hands-on learning activities that call for children to interact with materials, peers, adults, and schoolmates of different ages
- A combination of teacher-selected and student-selected activities
- The use of cooperative learning groups organized heterogeneously by gender, ethnicity, age, ability level, and so on
- Communication with and involvement of parents in conferences, classrooms, and home learning activities
- Assessment of student progress that includes frequent observation and narrative recording of student performance, portfolio development, and active involvement of students themselves.

Situation

Located in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, Konnoak Elementary School serves 382 students in grades K-5. White students make up 60 percent of the student population, and African-American students comprise nearly all of the other 40 percent.

Konnoak is a neighborhood school, with parents in the attendance area describable as members of the working middle class. A designated center for special education services, Konnoak serves approximately 70 students classified as Trainable Mentally Handicapped, Educable Mentally Handicapped, Behaviorally/Emotionally Handicapped, or Visually Impaired. The Konnoak staff-certified and classified-is approximately two-thirds white and one-third African-American.

Context

Having had positive experiences with nongraded grouping in the 1970s, Konnoak principal Janice Sherrill responded favorably when some of her staff began to express interest in trying this approach.

Both research and experience had shown Ms. Sherrill and her teachers that having to repeat grades is very traumatic for students and increases their chances of dropping out later in their school careers. They were also aware that multi-age grouping has been used successfully to meet the learning needs of slower students without forcing them to repeat an entire year's schoolwork.

IMPLEMENTATION

Konnoak teacher Kathy Priddy had amassed some experience with multi-age grouping when she taught a combined class of kindergarten and first grade children during the 1989-90 school year. "It was obvious to me that having these students in class together was beneficial to them both academically and socially," says Ms. Priddy. "The only problem was the difficulty involved in trying to maintain separate curricula for them according to their grade levels." Even so, the positive effects on students in the combined class led Ms. Priddy to continue this arrangement into the 1990-91 school year.

At that time, Konnoak staff members were receiving information and assistance for restructuring through the school's participation in the National Education Association's Mastery in Learning Consortium. Another source of consultant assistance during this period of time was Dr. Dudley Shearborn of nearby Salem College.

Both Dr. Shearborn and the NEA consultants made essentially the same observations about Konnoak's initial involvement in multi-age grouping: they indicated that it is neither necessary nor desirable to maintain separate curricula when working with multi-age groups. They cited research showing that student outcomes improve when the artificial pairing of student age with a particular grade-level curriculum is removed. And they provided encouragement and support for the transition to true nongraded grouping, in which children of different ages pursue the same curriculum, each at his or her own learning rate.

Ms. Priddy made the transition from "split-grade" to genuine nongraded grouping in the middle of the 1990-91 school year. Later in the year, a grant from the local Mary Babcock Foundation made it possible for other Winston-Salem teachers to visit Ms. Priddy's classroom and observe the multi-age program in operation.

A colleague who collaborated with Ms. Priddy and observed the development of her program was Konnoak teacher Barbara Manning, who implemented multi-age grouping with students in grades three through five at the beginning of the 1991-92 school year. Ms. Priddy's own classroom, meanwhile, became a K-2 group.

EXPANSION

Since that time, interest in and implementation of nongraded classes-named Cross-Age Learning Settings (CALs) by Konnoak staff-has spread to other teachers. In the complete absence of administrative directives or pressure, four more Konnoak teachers were teaching CALs classes as of the 1992-93 school year. Thus, in addition to the original K-2 and 3-5 classes, Konnoak implemented a second K-2 class, a second 3-5 class, a 1-2 class, and a 4-5 class. The addition of a staff member for the 4-5 class enabled Konnoak staff to progress toward another of their goals-to reduce class size to 18 or fewer.

Expressions of interest in nongraded grouping by additional Konnoak teachers suggest that the use of this structure is likely to expand to additional teachers and classrooms.

In the beginning, placement in the CALs classes was based on teacher nomination of students who might otherwise be considered for retention. Recognition of the benefits of the classes for ALL students, however, has led to heterogeneous assignment of students to both CALs and single-grade classes.

SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS

The CALS classes are also increasing main-streaming options for the school's large population of special education students. Jane Gurley, whose class consists mostly of children classifiable as third, fourth, and fifth graders, was among the first to see the potential of multi-age grouping for meeting the needs of these students. Educable Mentally Handicapped children and those classified as Behaviorally/Emotionally Handicapped have evidenced dramatic improvements in behavior during the past two school years as a result of being mainstreamed into CALS classes. And, as the research predicts, withdrawn and socially isolated older children have developed social skills and confidence as a result of in-class exposure to and opportunities to interact with younger children. As for the Learning Disabled children at Konnoak, they now have a daily half-hour of interaction with the LD specialist; the rest of their time they are mainstreamed.

TEACHER OVERVIEW

Asked for a general overview of the way the CALS classes operate, the teachers' group indicated that most activities begin with presentations to the whole class, followed by work within cooperative groups which are sometimes organized on the basis of skill needs and sometimes on the basis of student interest. It is their experience that children open up and participate much more readily in small groups than they do before the whole class.

There is a great deal of peer tutoring-sometimes set up as a formal assignment, but just as often pursued spontaneously as students seek each other's help and offer to share what they have learned. When skill groups meet, those older students who want to relearn or review material they have studied before can choose to sit in as this material is being introduced to another group. Just as often, younger children are exposed to lessons designed primarily for older students, thereby getting a preview of future learning activities and a chance to try their hands at material that represents a "stretch" for them, without concern about being evaluated.

When the concept of multi-age grouping is first introduced to parents, they are often apprehensive about its effect on older and academically gifted students, fearing that their progress might be slowed by the presence of younger and less advanced students. It is not surprising, therefore, that Konnoak parents expressed this concern in the beginning.

While indicating that the parents' current views could best be gleaned from the parents themselves (during an activity to take place later in the visitation), the CALS teachers did remark that (1) no parents have withdrawn their children from the CALS classes, (2) many parents of children currently placed in traditional single-grade classes have expressed interest in moving them into CALS classes, and (3) most parents of children classified as academically gifted have chosen to keep their students at Konnoak rather than sending them to special gifted classes at other schools.

In addition to the state-mandated End-of-Grade Tests, Mrs. Sherrill notes that the CALS teachers have become involved in using more authentic performance assessments-such as student writing portfolios and case studies-and conduct action research on the utility of the different teaching and assessment techniques they use.

Staff development activities of particular relevance to the school's CALS classrooms include a schoolwide whole language retreat supported by a Chapter 2 mini-grant; school-level staff development activities in school improvement, restructuring, and research; and a district collaboration with Salem College to provide staff development in integrating the curriculum. Staff development in multi-cultural programming has led to long-term learning units on

African-American and Native American cultures and, at the time of the visitation, a focus on the cultures of Pacific Rim nations.

Practice: Multi-Age Grouping in Konnoak Classrooms

K-1-2: MS. PRIDDY

Because North Carolina provides support for teaching assistants at the kindergarten level, teacher Kathy Priddy and her assistant, Roland Hayes, could be observed working as a team with their K-1-2 class. Like others of Konnoak's classes, this one had displays reflecting the school's Pacific Rim learning activities. Colorful maps of Vietnam, together with drawings and writings depicting Vietnamese clothes, food, building materials, and art, dominated one side of the classroom.

Mr. Hayes facilitated a math activity in which the class's 18 students sat in a semi-circle on the floor near the chalkboard and developed math problems whose answer was the day's date, which was the 17th. Children with more advanced math skills constructed problems such as $34-17=17$, while younger ones generated simpler ones, such as $5+5+5+2=17$. Each contributing student was praised for his or her contribution, and Mr. Hayes helped those whose initial attempts were incorrect to work through a sequence of steps to arrive at an answer of 17.

With the children still seated on the floor around him, Mr. Hayes then recited a proverb: "A weed is a plant whose virtues have not yet been discovered." After explaining the meanings of the key words in the proverb, Mr. Hayes asked the children for their interpretations of it, and a lively discussion ensued.

Later, as students were putting together jigsaw puzzles depicting scenes involving Disney characters, Ms. Priddy called attention to the fact that these puzzles are much more complex than the 12-piece puzzles that used to be provided for kindergarten classes. "We didn't know what these kids were capable of," she said, "until they were in an environment where they could work with more sophisticated materials."

During a writing workshop activity, Ms. Priddy also explained that the whole language approach to developing communication skills had equipped her with techniques for differentiating between, for example, a true skill deficit in writing and a simple need for additional writing practice.

As one learning activity followed another, Ms. Priddy and Mr. Hayes could be observed circulating among groups of students, monitoring their work and providing assistance as needed. Student conversation, meanwhile, was reasonably quiet and focused on learning activities.

One notable feature of this class was the presence of a blind student. Although a special education aide was on hand to help this girl with modified versions of the class's learning activities, she also received spontaneous offers of help and was shown other acts of kindness from fellow students as the day progressed.

The sense of the group as a "family" was reinforced near the end of the day, as children made presents for "the new baby," (a newborn sibling of one of the students) and also celebrated Mr. Hayes's birthday.

K-1-2: MS. PURCELL

In a large classroom sectioned into activity areas by bookcases and furniture, Terri Purcell's more capable readers-most of them second graders-were reading stories to younger children. These readers had obviously learned how to make the story-reading activity a true learning experience for their younger classmates: They held their books-or had a classmate hold them-in such a way that the listening children could see the text and illustrations as the stories were being read, and some readers pointed to each word as he or she read it.

After reading a page or two, the reader in one group pointed out key features of the accompanying illustration, much as a teacher might do when reading to students. In another, the reader used different voices for the words spoken by the story's various characters. Still another paused and asked questions periodically while reading the story-either about the story's plot or about what her listeners might have done in the story character's position. Asked how it felt to lead the story activity, one reader said, "We get to help the kindergarten kids; we show them things they don't know yet."

The story-reading was followed by a cross-age tutoring activity, in which Ms. Purcell's students worked on reading assignments with one of Konnoak's fifth grade classes.

3-4-5: MS. GURLEY

A purposeful, businesslike atmosphere pervaded Jane Gurley's class as students sat in mixed-age groups at tables for four, some working on morning math activities and some writing in their journals about the weekend just past. Ms. Gurley had taken roll while students were beginning their work and quickly dispensed with other morning "housekeeping" matters. She then moved among the students, responding to questions and offering suggestions for their journal writing activities.

This classroom featured a "Future Famous Americans" display, which included pictures of Ms. Gurley's students and descriptions they had written about themselves. Other displays included haiku poems written by the students as part of their focus on Japanese culture, and geometric patterns designed and colored by students and reflecting a wide range of complexity.

The administration of the state-mandated CAT is one of the few occasions when CALS teachers call attention to students' grade levels. Because students in grades 3-5 were to be tested on the day following the visitation, Ms. Gurley prepared her class by describing how the testing was to proceed and responded to their concerns with explanations and reassurances. "Go to bed by 9:00 p.m.," she recommended, "and be sure to eat a good breakfast. And remember, you are not expected to know the answers to everything on the test. Just do your best."

Following the orientation to the upcoming testing, Ms. Gurley assembled the children in the classroom reading corner and read *The Dragon's Robe*, a story about a king who failed to take leadership responsibility for his people. Relaxed and attentive, the students commented on the important role of dragons in Chinese culture and made observations about the story and what message it might hold for them.

3-4-5: MS. MANNING

A visit to Barbara Manning's class provided opportunities first to observe students working on

fractions and division problems in cooperative groups, and then to talk with them about their opinions of CALS classes. In response to the question, "How do you like being in a class with both older and younger kids?" students gave the following responses:

- "I like it. You get to learn with kids ahead of you, so when you get there, you already know some of it."
- "Sometimes if your work is too hard, older kids help you."
- "I like it that we can help the third graders, because if we forget, we can learn it again."
- "When you help younger kids, it makes you feel happy, because you feel like you know everything."
- "Well, sometimes the older kids boss us around, but sometimes we get to go on a field trip and they don't."
- "I like being in Ms. Manning's class again. She knows what you need to learn, and you can get used to her. You know what she'll take and what she won't take."

Parents' Views of CALS

Two gatherings with parents of children in CALS classes provided a wealth of information about how the program is perceived by them. All eight parents said they had reservations at first, fearing that their children might not get enough individual attention or that older and faster-learning children might be held back by being in class with younger ones. However, all eight have seen their children benefit academically and interpersonally from being in the CALS classes and, consequently, all these parents have become ardent supporters of the program. In their own words:

- *Mrs. W., mother of a third grader:* "My daughter is certified for academically gifted class, and I was worried she might not be challenged enough in a CALS class. What happened, though, is that she willingly spends more time on her homework and even bought a set of "division flashcards" with her own money! I like it that she'll be with an excellent teacher like Ms. Manning for three years, and I think she'll make a better transition to middle school than her brother did."
- *Mrs. H. mother of a third grader:* "She has learned a lot of responsibility. She relates better to her younger brother than before. I thought maybe the handicapped kids would hold the class back, but they don't seem to. Maybe this way they will have better attitudes toward the handicapped when they get older. I hope so."
- *Mrs. R., mother of a third grader and a fifth grader:* "Both my kids are in CALS classes. I wondered at first if there would be enough structure in the classes. The staff took the time to explain it to us thoroughly, though, and of course it was optional, which made it much more acceptable. My kids' appetites for learning have really increased. And my fifth grader's social skills are really improving, because she has leadership responsibility in her class. I used to think of achievement as grades only; but now I can see the importance of achievement in leadership and helping others."
- *Mrs. C., mother of a third grader:* "I like the small classes, and my son doesn't get bored. He's learning a lot. He even came home the other day feeling good because he told a fifth grader how to spell a word."
- *Mr and Mrs. P., parents of a kindergartener and a second grader:* "Our older daughter has been in the program since the beginning, and our other daughter just started. They are so different, but the CALS classes meet both their needs. We totally support what goes on in the classes. We have such a great communication system with the teachers here...nothing is secretive; they share everything with us. Our older daughter was so shy,

and this year she narrated part of the school program. You would not have believed she could do that! Our other daughter could have been in an academically gifted class, but she gets the challenging academic material she needs right here in the K-2 class."

- *Mr. Ch., father of a fifth grader:* "She was in CALS last year and is again this year. Look at how much she's improved in just that short time [displaying report cards]. My wife and I met with the learning disabilities teacher, because our daughter was easily distracted and had a slight learning problem. After being in the CALS class, the testing doesn't show any learning problem anymore. She's working up to speed without special ed."
- *Mrs. G. mother of a fourth grader:* "We were so lucky to move into the Konnoak area. I've been thoroughly impressed. The teachers are outstanding. Without the right teachers, this wouldn't work at all."

These positive parental responses are corroborated by the results of a survey completed by parents of CALS students during the spring of 1993. In response to 30 questions covering their children's attitudes toward school, their own attitudes, the CALS program, the school's support programs, and the quality of school-home communication, the incidence of responses of "outstanding" or "good" was over ninety percent.

Other Indicators

Another survey was conducted in the spring of 1993 with CALS student participants. Students were asked to select a smiling, neutral, or frowning face as representing their feelings about various aspects of their CALS experiences-working in cooperative groups, sharing ideas, helping and receiving help from others, interacting with teachers, and so on. Student respondents gave positive (smiling) responses to nearly 70 percent of the items listed and negative (frowning) responses only about two percent of them.

Narrative case study reports shared by CALS teachers provide detailed documentation of children's needs and successes, track both academic and affective outcomes, and offer a much more complete picture of children's performance than that which emerges from standardized tests. They enable teachers to identify and address problem areas quickly. Most that were available for review indicate considerable progress on the part of students.

It is also very much worth noting that Konnoak was selected by the America's Best Schools Project of *Redbook* magazine as one of the nation's 177 best elementary schools. Along with its enriched arts courses and computer literacy offerings, Konnoak's CALS program was a major reason for its citation as one of the country's top schools. The April 1993 issue of *Redbook* identifies the winning schools and, in addition to their individual strengths, cites the general characteristics they share: high levels of parent involvement, caring and committed principals, nurturing teachers, an emphasis on writing (especially whole language), innovative uses of technology, alternative assessments, supportive learning environments, and close relationships with their communities.

Those who want to know more about the CALS program at Konnoak are encouraged to contact Ms. Janice J. Sherrill, Principal, Konnoak Elementary School, 3200 Renon Road, Winston-Salem, NC 27127, 919/788-7911.

Government.

This publication is in the public domain and may be reproduced and disseminated without permission. Please acknowledge NWREL as the developer.

November 1993

This document's URL is:
[file:///Users/jeffginger/Desktop/Implementing a Nongraded
Elementary.html](file:///Users/jeffginger/Desktop/Implementing%20a%20Nongraded%20Elementary.html)

[Home](#) | [Up & Coming](#) | [Programs & Projects](#): School Improvement | [People](#) |
[Products & Publications](#) | [Topics](#)

© 2001 [Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory](#)

Date of Last Update: 8/31/01

Email [Webmaster](#)

Tel. 503.275.9500