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DEVELOPING AND ORGANIZING A PRIMARY MULTIGRADE CLASSROOM

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A Project  
Presented to the  
Faculty of  
California State University,  
San Bernardino

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
in  
Education

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by  
Deborah Lea Cordoba  
June 1997

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Deborah Lea Cordoba

June 1997

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## ABSTRACT

Nongraded classrooms were once part of the education system in the form of the one-room schoolhouse. These were simply created because of the low number of children present in a given area. However, as America became more industrialized and immigrants entered the country, there became a need for more schools and a more efficient education system. Thus, graded education was begun. Nevertheless, some people disagreed with the concept of graded education. Out of this unhappiness came the idea of nongraded education which recognizes and plans for a wide range range of pupil abilities, provides for different rates of progress, and adjusts to individual emotional and social needs. Today, research has indicated that students in nongraded classrooms in general, perform better not only academically, but socially and emotionally as well(Pavan, 1992). They enjoy school and are more willing to learn. Connections between what is learned at school and what it has to do with the rest of their lives are more easily made than in a regular classroom.

Because of these positive effects, more and more states are mandating the implementation of nongraded classrooms in their schools. However, some teachers are not willing or ready to change to a nongraded classroom.

This project is an easily understood resource for teachers to use to assist them in changing to a nongraded classroom. It includes how to organize the classroom, how to integrate curriculum, how to assess student progress, and how to involve parents.

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## Chapter One

### Introduction and Statement of the Problem

The structure of American education today, graded education, accepts the idea that students who are the same age develop and learn at the same level and at the same pace. However, this is not an accurate assumption. Children actually vary in their rates of cognitive, social, and physical growth. In fact, "Children entering the first grade differ in mental age by approximately four full years" (Gaustad, 1992, p. 1). Because there is such a diversity of children and the rate at which they develop, education is being reevaluated in order to better meet the needs of children in schools today.

One movement that is being examined to improve education is the nongraded classroom. Pavan (1992) states that the nongraded classroom "does not use grade-level designations for students of classes. Progress is reported in terms of tasks completed and the manner of learning, not by grades or rating systems" (p.22). In addition, students are not only actively involved in their learning, but in assessment and evaluation as well. Nongraded is used interchangeably with the terms multiage, mixed-age, and multigrade just to name a few.

There are several benefits to nongraded classrooms as addressed in Kasten and Clarke's (1993) book, *The Multi-Age Classroom: A Family of Learners*. First, children who are

in nongraded classrooms benefit academically. For example, they often help each other understand material that cannot always be explained by a teacher. But, before they can explain it, they must thoroughly understand a concept in order to teach it. This requires thinking skills beyond simple memorization. Second, older students in a nongraded classroom serve as role models for the younger ones. A younger student who would have been the top student in a regular classroom progresses even further because the child is in contact with older students who have higher academic levels. Because of this, the younger student "advances to his/her best potential and not that of his agemates" (p. 19).

Besides profiting academically, students in a nongraded classroom also benefit socially. Kasten and Clarke discovered in their research that there is an increase in self-esteem, maturity, positive attitudes about school, and better relationships with parents. Some studies even show that children in nongraded classrooms tend to assist and support classmates more than children in unit-aged classrooms (Kasten & Clarke, 1993). In addition, it is easier to promote the sense of a community due to the diversity of strengths. This, in turn, makes children in nongraded classrooms more collaborative cooperative.

"Utilizing the experience, capabilities, and interests of



different children makes community participants depend on each other for making that community work"(p. 27).

This supportive research has been instrumental in making the concept of nongraded classrooms one of the new trends in education today as they provide children an opportunity to succeed rather than fail. Although most schools still utilize traditional ideas and methods through the use of unit-aged classrooms, there are more and more school systems currently implementing nongraded classrooms.

## Theoretical Foundation

The nongraded classroom draws on the same set of assumptions that are a part of a socio-psychological perspective of literacy learning(Weaver, 1994). A more popular name for this perspective is called the whole language approach. Whole-language, although difficult to define, is really a belief that children learn best when what they are learning is made relevant to their lives. Whole-language instructors believe that we learn from active involvement. "Children need to manipulate their environment in order to understand it" (Shanahan, 1991, p.2). Because of this philosophy, believers in whole-language are less likely to use textbooks, skill and drill, ditto sheets, and pre-written curriculum of any kind. Instead, teachers recognize learning when it occurs and respond to it in an appropriate manner.

In a whole-language classroom, the environment is conducive to active student involvement. Children are involved in the learning process through the use of hands-on activities, classroom discussions and projects, and concrete experiences related to real life. They are allowed to participate in decision-making as opposed to having the teacher be entirely in charge. Instead, teachers are more likely to occupy the role of facilitator, monitoring, observing, and providing guidance(Davis, 1992).

Instead of isolated learning, as is popular in a traditional classroom, whole-language learning is based on instruction that is integrated. For example, math need not be limited strictly to computation. Manipulatives are used to explore, findings are discussed, and conclusions are written about the discoveries made (Goodman, 1986). In this way, reading, writing, and math are all incorporated into one lesson. Thematic units make it easier to integrate subject areas. Thematic units can be based on science, social studies, literature, or an integration of several subjects. For instance, if a class is studying about water, science may be included by learning the states of water. The discussion of bodies of water and their location would integrate social studies. Measuring rainfall or snowfall would integrate math while writing about water integrates language. Art and music could also be easily integrated into a unit about water.

Overall, a whole-language classroom is one in which "kids and teachers plan together what they will do..." (Goodman, 1986, p. 31). It is one where manipulatives and plenty of books, magazines, newspapers, and other reading material are readily available. The use of basal readers, skill programs, workbooks, and other irrelevant materials are used sparingly or eliminated altogether. Instead,

learning is meaningful to the students and student involvement is substantial.

The characteristics of a whole-language classroom are consistent to those found in a nongraded classroom as illustrated in this project. Since Kentucky, Mississippi, and Oregon have already mandated nongraded classrooms for grades 1-3, other states are expected to follow (Lodish, 1992). Teachers who are used to teaching only one grade level at a time and in a more formalized manner than what is expected in a nongraded classroom, may experience great difficulty in the transformation. Because of this, teachers need to be prepared in order to make the transition into a nongraded classroom easier.

Although there are books, journal articles, conferences, handbooks, and other information available about the benefits of nongraded classrooms and how to implement them, a need still remains for a simple and direct manual written for the classroom teacher. This project will provide general strategies so that the frustration and fear that is associated with changing to a nongraded classroom can be reduced.

## Chapter Two

### Review of Literature

After reviewing literature on the topic of nongraded education, many important components have emerged as areas of concern. These include the history of graded education, failure of graded education, advent of nongraded education, revival of nongraded education, current perspectives in nongraded advantages of nongraded education, and changing to a nongraded classroom.

### History of Graded Education

Until the middle of the nineteenth century, schools mainly consisted of a wide variety of ages with one teacher. They were usually taught in one room with children working together to help one another to learn. Nevertheless, there was a need for change and thus graded education was founded. The history of graded education, grouping children by age, originated in the mid-eighteen hundreds by Horace Mann, Secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education. It was at that time in history that the industrial revolution and urbanization came about in the country. The great influx of people meant that a more efficient education system was needed to accommodate large groups of children. It made sense to Mann after visiting Prussia in 1843 to cluster these pupils by age. Not only would classes be segregated by age, teachers would be in

separate rooms. Public education as most adults know it today had begun(Gaustad, 1992).

Soon, however, there were many faults found in the idea of graded education. Many argued that individual needs of students were not being met. For example, although the chronological age of students may have been the same, they were learning at different rates and through the use of various learning styles. Consequently, although a teacher technically taught first grade, in all actuality the person could be teaching kindergarten, first, second, third, and maybe even higher grades. Furthermore, with the diversity of backgrounds, not all children were learning in the same way. The same teaching technique did not work for all children. With such a difference in abilities, some students were falling behind, while others were bored. Students were retained if they did not meet certain expectations and often repeated the same grade without success. At the same time, children were being promoted without obtaining needed social, emotional, or academic skills. It was apparent that the idea of all children developing at the same rate, providing all children the same assignments in the same manner, and assuming all children are equal in abilities was not the answer to public education(Gaustad,1992, p.5).

### Advent of Nongraded Education

The call for improvement of public education began in the 1930's and continued through the 1950's and into the early 1970's. In 1959, the book, *The Nongraded School*, by Goodlad and Anderson was published. In it contained studies and research supporting the idea of nongraded programs. They argued that "grouping children homogeneously on the basis of a single criterion such as age does not reliably produce a group that is homogeneous on other criteria relevant to teaching and learning" (Katz, 1990, p.viii). Thus began the implementation of what many schools called nongradedness. Team-teaching and individualized instruction were seen in some schools as were other programs associated with nongraded instruction such as open education (Miller, 1991).

Although some schools tried a nongraded approach, in reality the idea reached only a small portion of the American schoolchildren. The failure of nongraded education was attributed to many things. These include poor definition, insufficient training, lack of support, and tradition.

First, people did not have a true understanding of the definition of nongradedness. According to Pratt (1986), in some cases, graded schools divided age groups into "tracks", thus providing what was thought to be more

individualized instruction. In other schools, walls were removed to allow teachers to team-teach. Furthermore, some schools eliminated grade distinctions but still practiced the same philosophies of a graded school. In reality, although schools were claiming to be nongraded, the structure of a graded classroom still remained the same.

Another reason for failure was the lack of training teachers received. First, teachers were trained to teach to a specific grade level. By assuming that all children in the same grade were at the same level, whole classroom instruction became easy and teachers only had to learn a certain amount of material. Teaching, using a nongraded approach, was not only more time-consuming, it was not part of any prior experience or training.

Still, another explanation for failure was the lack of support that nongraded education received. Besides the extra planning time, there were textbook companies and standardized testing to encounter. Textbook companies, thriving on making a profit, produced material designed for each specific grade level. Textbooks, workbooks, and ditto sheets became a main part of determining school curriculum. Secondly, standardized testing, originally developed to identify retarded children, eventually was put to use to determine the "normal" ability of children at a



certain age and grade level. Gaustad(1992) stated the following:

The quantitative format of standardized tests dovetails neatly with the concept of classifying students by grade levels. Unfortunately, the validity of tests is questionable for young children. Children are erratic test takers; results can vary greatly depending on the child's mood, reaction to the test-taker, and even ability to control a pencil" (p. 7).

Yet, schools came to depend on this mode of assessment.

Finally, the fact that graded education has existed for over a century is a strong reason that it still continues today. People, including parents, teachers, and administrators are familiar with it because it was the way they were taught. Their philosophy is that it worked for them so it will work for others. In addition, training and curriculum were based on graded education. Again, it just seemed like the natural way to teach.

#### Revival of Nongraded Education

Despite the unsuccessful early implementation of nongraded education, it returned in the 1990's. As more and more research was completed on children and how they learn, it became apparent to a large group of educators that education reform was needed. The traditional classroom, with its desks in rows, the teacher in the front

of the room, and children learning only the material that the teacher chooses to teach them, obviously no longer met the needs of America's changing population. Instead, children must be seen as unique individuals who grow at different rates and learn in a variety of ways.

Consequently, children learn best in an environment that includes concrete activities, a diversity of learning styles, flexibility, and integrated curriculum.

According to Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget children are unable to think in an abstract manner. Instead, they learn best when they are actively involved in their learning and are allowed to explore and manipulate material (Gaustad, 1992). As children grow and change, they are constantly learning about their environment. It is necessary for them to be able to see and feel things in order to discover. Learning through games and "play" helps to develop creativity and imagination. Therefore, the opportunity for hands-on activities must be available in school if children are to grasp the concepts that they are required to learn.

In the past several years, there has been extensive research completed on the way people learn. It was found that not everyone learns in the same way. In fact, as stated by Armstrong (1994), seven different learning styles have been identified by Howard Gardner, professor of

education at Harvard University. They include linguistic(intelligence of words), mathematical(intelligence of numbers and reasoning), musical(intelligence of tone and rhythm), spatial(intelligence of pictures and images), bodily-kinesthetic(intelligence of the whole body), interpersonal(intelligence of social understanding), and intrapersonal(intelligence of self-knowledge). Overall, our traditional education system promotes the linguistic and mathematical intelligences. Unfortunately, not all children comprehend concepts in these ways. Some understand better through the use of music while others need to draw in order to make sense of what they are learning. Furthermore, some children work well in groups while others prefer to be alone.

Flexibility also plays an important part in a nongraded classroom. When curriculum includes a variety of activities that are exciting and meaningful, students are more excited and involved in the learning process. Tasks that allow students to work in groups and independently are a part of the nongraded classroom. Not only is the curriculum flexible, but the physical environment as well. The latest research suggests that the physical arrangement of a room affects learning. Comfortable furniture that includes pillows is part of the decor of the room. The

room is arranged so that children are able to move freely from one activity to another, but yet are able to work both in small groups and independently. In addition, the teacher is able to recognize when change is needed whether it is in group structure or a lesson itself. Wherever or whatever the change, the teacher must be aware of what is going on in the classroom and be willing to modify at all times. Most importantly, however, is that the teacher exhibit patience, understanding, and enthusiasm(Wood, 1991).

Children learn best if what is being taught to them is integrated throughout the curriculum as opposed to teaching a concept by isolating certain subjects and skills. It is important that every concept that is taught integrates as many subject areas as possible including language arts, math, science, social studies, music, art, and physical education because "an integrated curriculum helps children make connections. It also reflects the fact that young children see the whole and then differentiate the parts"(Grant & Johnson,1995,p.19). In other words, what is being learned is more meaningful and is more likely to be remembered.

#### Current Perspectives on Nongraded Education

The studies that have been completed on nongraded education favor it over the traditional education system.

The primary philosophy of nongraded education is that all children are individuals who mature at different rates and in different ways. Nongraded education has many advantages including academic, social, and emotional.

Research involving the cognitive aspect of nongraded classrooms produced confusing and inconclusive results. For example, some research reviewed by Bruce Miller(1990) indicated that students in nongraded classrooms performed consistently higher in mathematics, reading, and language. However, in eight other studies, no difference was found between nongraded and graded classroom academic performance. As stated by Miller(1990), studies by Rule indicated that in reading, students from nongraded classrooms performed significantly higher than those in graded classrooms. However, in mathematics, the results were reversed with students in graded classrooms scoring higher than those in nongraded classrooms. Furthermore, according to Morris, Proger, and Morrell(1971), studies conducted by Robert Carbone(1961)found that there was greater achievement in the students from graded classrooms as compared to those of nongraded classrooms.

Yet, Barbara Pavan(1992) states that after reviewing sixty-four studies published between 1968 and 1990, she found that fifty-seven used standardized achievement tests to compare nongraded and graded classrooms. Of those

studies, 52 or 91 percent indicated that the nongraded groups performed better (58 percent) or as well as (33 percent) the graded groups in the area of academic achievement. Nongraded students did worse than graded students in only 9 percent of the studies. Likewise, studies showed that students who were in a nongraded program for a number of years performed better academically, while seven studies revealed that students who spent all of their elementary years in the same nongraded school rated far better than those students who went to a traditional school for the same length of time.

Even more research suggested that black students, underachievers, low socioeconomic students, and boys especially benefit from being in a nongraded classroom. In 18 of the reports reviewed by Pavan(1992), all but one showed that boys and black students in nongraded schools scored higher on achievement tests than those in graded schools. Furthermore, underachievers and students of lower socioeconomic status also showed greater academic achievement when placed in nongraded schools.

Children in nongraded classrooms are more likely to exhibit several social behaviors such as leadership and responsibility than children who are in a traditional graded classroom simply because of the variety of ages that are present. For example, as stated in Katz(1990), French,

Waas, Stright, and Baker observed children in both mixed and same-age groups during a decision-making process related to classroom activities. They discovered that the older children in the multi-age group tended to exhibit leadership behaviors while assisting in group processes. In another similar study, according to Katz, (1990), Stright and French observed seven and nine year olds and nine and eleven year olds sequencing a set of pictures. They noticed that the older children in each group organized and encouraged the participation of the younger children. Stright and French further stated that children find it difficult to be leaders in a group of peers. Yet, leadership roles occur naturally when younger children are mixed with older children.

In addition to Katz's findings, Kasten and Clarke(1993) observed a kindergarten child who had no social skills, had no idea that letters or words existed, and was a potential behavior problem. A year later, after being in a nongraded classroom, the same child was more responsible and more mature. The teacher believed that it was because the older students did not allow the immature behavior to continue. Furthermore, the older children served as good role models. Consequently, the evidence suggests that nongraded classrooms provide an appropriate

environment for increasing leadership skills and responsibility in children.

Not only does the nongraded classroom benefit children in social ways, it has emotional advantages as well. According to Barbara Pavan, (1992) a mental health section was included in 42 of the studies she reviewed. Attitudes toward school, self-esteem, and school anxiety were measured. It was clear that the students in nongraded classrooms had a better attitude toward school than those in graded classrooms. In fact, 52 percent of the studies verified that nongraded classrooms were better for students while 43 percent found no difference. Only 5 percent indicated that nongraded schools were worse when it came to measuring attitudes, self-esteem, and anxiety toward school. In concurrence with Pavan is Bruce Miller (1991). In the studies that he reviewed, 21 measures were used to assess attitudes toward school. It was discovered that 81 percent of the students preferred the nongraded classroom over a graded one.

Furthermore, in his article, Miller (1990) stated that studies by Milburn found that children of all ages in a nongraded school had a more positive attitude toward school than those in a school with single grades. In the same article, Sherman and Milburn discovered that students in a nongraded classroom had a better self-concept when compared



to students of a graded classroom. Moreover, Sherman determined that students in a nongraded classroom had stronger relationships with each other while Mycock found that students and teachers were closer in a nongraded situation. For the most part, studies indicated that children in nongraded classrooms were more apt to have better attitudes toward themselves, each other, and school (Miller, 1990). Because of the research, more and more material was written to assist schools in changing to a nongraded structure.

#### Changing To A Nongraded Classroom

Becoming a nongraded school or classroom does not happen immediately. Rather, it is a slow process with every step of the way needing careful study and consideration. Some issues that must be examined are teacher selection, class composition, classroom organization, curriculum, assessment, parent involvement, inservice, and administration.

##### Teacher Selection

In order for a nongraded program to have a chance at being successful, it is helpful if the teachers have the choice of whether or not they want to participate. According to Kasten and Clarke, "change is never as smooth or effective when it is mandated or imposed" (1993, p. 40). If it is not possible to give teachers the choice, it is

necessary that teachers are at least part of the change by offering advice and aiding in decision-making. It is the teachers that will, more than anyone else, not only witness the successes of the nongraded classroom but the concerns as well simply because they will witness firsthand the nongraded classroom on a daily basis. They will be the ones who are directly involved with the children.

Peer support is also important in selecting teachers for a nongraded classroom. For example, if only two classes are going to be started, they should both be in the same grade level. Starting one in the primary grades and one in the upper grades would be less effective because the teachers would have no one with whom to plan, to offer suggestions, or simply to talk (Kasten, 1993). Still another recommendation for selecting teachers for a nongraded classroom is the amount of respect that they have from parents. Parents are less likely to accept the idea of a nongraded classroom if a teacher is not well-known or creditable. On the other hand, parents are more apt to accept a nongraded classroom if they have confidence in the teacher (Kasten, 1993). Not only should the selection of teachers be carefully considered in creating a nongraded classroom but the placement of children needs to be regarded as well.

## Class Composition

Views on how to appropriately place children into a nongraded classrooms differ and may be easy or difficult depending on the procedure. Specific ways to group children are by age, compatibility with the teacher, and peer groups.

Mixing ages is one method for selecting children for nongraded classrooms. The Kentucky Department of Education suggests three ways to group children by ages. Multi-year groups contain children who vary in ages from three to four years. These would be the former K-2, 1-3, and K-3. Dual-age classes consist of children of two different ages in the same two years of the program. Examples of these classes would be the former K-1, 1-2, and 2,3. Single-year groups are children who are in the same year of the program but may include two or three ages (Kentucky Department of Education, 1991).

The idea of grouping by ages is furthered by other teachers. For example, Randa Nachbar (1989) agrees that classes of five and six-year old children work well together. Her principal recognizes that the children compare academically to those who are in nongraded classrooms. They also are more cooperative and motivated. However, others such as Kathleen Cushman (1990) believe that five-year-olds should not be placed with older children

because they are still in the preoperational stage. Other schools use the knowledge of developmental change to divide children into overlapping age groups. Usually between the ages of six and nine, children move into another cognitive stage. Examples of these groups are 1-3, 3-6, 6-9, and 9-12.

A student's compatibility with a certain teacher is something to be considered when grouping children in a nongraded classroom. For instance, does the child need a warm and supportive teacher or does he/she work better with a strict and demanding teacher? Would the child perform better with a teacher who is predictable or one who uses a variety of techniques and styles? Careful observation can answer these questions and assist in a more appropriate placement of a child.

Selecting a peer group is also important when placing a child. Would the child work better with well-known friends or be distracted by them? Does the child need the security of old friends or the challenge of making new friends? Again, observation can answer these questions. Grouping children in this way is significant because students learn from their peers as well as from teachers (Hunter, 1992). A classroom is more likely to be successful if there is a compatible arrangement of children.

Even after age and compatibility with teachers and other students are examined, Nachbar says, "My experience suggests that random selection works as well as any fixed criteria" (p.3). Whatever the technique, the Kentucky Department of Education(1991) recommends that the teachers should not be the only ones involved in deciding how children are grouped, but administration, counselors, other support staff, and parents be included as well. Kasten and Clarke(1993) suggest that classes should be similar to other classes in the school. They should be heterogeneously arranged including children with a wide range of abilities and interests.

#### Curriculum

Curriculum in the nongraded classroom is different from the curriculum in the graded classroom. Typically, in the graded classroom certain objective are met in each grade. For example, addition and subtraction without regrouping are taught in first grade while beginning multiplication may be taught in third grade. Subjects are taught in isolation and teachers faithfully follow the textbook and use workbook activities to guide them through their teaching. Little problem-solving and creativity is used. Unfortunately, most students view this way of teaching as boring and irrelevant. However, as more and more teachers are being trained in whole language,

Mathematics Their Way, and other hands-on approaches, this approach is slowly changing. Some graded classrooms are taking on more of a nongraded classroom approach to teaching. Unlike most graded classrooms, however, in the nongraded classroom the performance of students is continuously assessed. By doing that, teachers are able to more appropriately teach what the students need to learn. Sometimes this is not the case in graded classrooms (Hunter, 1992).

In addition, thematic units are often used in a nongraded classroom. By using themes, material in each subject is easily integrated into one project. For example, a class writes a letter to the school district asking that a school bus be parked outside of the school. While it is there, the class walks through it and examines it. They learn traffic rules in the classroom and in the end build a bus from cardboard. During all of this, writing, math, social studies, and art were all integrated (Gaustad, 1992). "Teaching with themes or concepts that cut across traditional curriculum areas offers a flexibility that allows children of different ages and abilities to become involved and to learn at their own pace" (Grant & Johnson, 1995, p.87). Moreover, children are more enthusiastic about learning and make connections better if they are involved in creating the activities.

Learning takes on a whole new meaning for both students and teachers.

#### Classroom materials and organization

In general, the nongraded classroom consists of a variety of manipulatives and hands-on activities located in learning or activity centers. An abundance of literature at a variety of reading levels is present as are materials such as maps, globes, computers, musical instruments, and listening equipment. Students are also seen working together in both small and large groups. Because of this, the desks are usually arranged in small groups facing one another or scattered around the room. Ordinarily children do not have assigned seats and are free to move around the room as needed. The teacher is not found at the front of the room lecturing but instead is wandering around the room assisting and observing or conferencing with individual students. Students are aware of the rules and routines and know what the teacher expects. They help one another and themselves.

Flexible grouping strategies are a must in a nongraded classroom. Children often work in groups as they might in a graded classroom, but the groups are changed as needed for the purpose of a specific instruction. Some ways to group students are homogeneously. This arrangement consists of students with similar levels of experience and

achievement and is used when a specific skill needs to be strengthened or when a group is working on something that requires similar background such as a neighborhood project. Heterogeneous grouping, on the other hand, consists of students who vary in sex, abilities, race, or age. Here children are able to learn from each other and their differences (Davis, 1992). In addition, heterogeneous grouping lends itself to cooperative learning, "an extensively researched instructional method in which students are heterogeneously grouped to produce academic and social gains. Students are individually accountable for their learning, yet also experience a sense of interdependency for the success of their group" (Davis, 1992, p. 22). All in all, no matter how students are grouped, it is crucial that the groups are flexible and changed as needed depending on the purpose.

#### Assessment

"Assessment is the process of gathering evidence and documenting a child's learning and growth" (Hill & Ruptic, 1994, p.8). Authentic assessment is the term most often heard in a nongraded classroom. Gone are the standardized test and other measurements like it. Instead, other forms of assessment such as surveys, anecdotal records, conferencing, and portfolios, are used.



In order for teachers to get to know students and their interests, strengths, and weaknesses, it is helpful for students to complete a survey. Types of surveys include interest and attitude. Interest surveys can provide the teacher with information about the child's home, friends, or other interests such as sports. In this way, the teacher can suggest books for the student to read, topics for a story, or just about anything. Attitude surveys, on the other hand, tell a student's attitude toward school or a certain subject. Either survey, interest or attitude, can provide a teacher with information in a short amount of time (Hill, 1994).

Anecdotal records are another form of authentic assessment. They are simply brief notes written about a student based on observation. They encourage teachers to become more active observers and listeners. The information gathered from the written notes can be used to evaluate students' learning to determine if they need extra assistance or extra challenge, help make instructional decisions for individuals or the class, provide documentation, monitor patterns in behavior of students, and evaluate teaching. Information that is recorded might include specific behaviors in a variety of contexts, choices of activities and friends, skills or strategies the student uses, and comments the student makes. The teacher

may also want to record some skills or strategies taught to a particular student. Anecdotal records may be kept in a notebook with a section for each child, in individual folders, on file cards, on a computer disk. Notes can also be written on post-it notes or on computer labels and then later transferred to folders or a notebook. The significant things to remember about anecdotal records are to date everything, be specific, and be brief. Furthermore, be cautious not to add opinion to the notes. Only report what is observed(Hill, 1994).

In addition to surveys and anecdotal records, checklists can also be used for assessment. Checklists are convenient when focusing on specific skills or behaviors. For instance, in assessing reading, an item on a checklist might be, "uses pictures clues." If the student is using picture clues while reading, the teacher would check and date that column on the checklist. Checklists are an easy way to assess because the essential comments or stages of development are already recorded. Students can also use checklists in evaluating their own work. In editing a paper, for example, a checklist might include items such as "name on paper", "read to yourself", and "names capitalized." Checklists can be used for just about anything a teacher desires. They are simple, but they are also an excellent assessment tool(Hill, 1994).

Conferencing is still another type of authentic assessment. Conferencing allows the teacher to speak with and review student progress on an individual basis. Teachers often use anecdotal records and checklists during a conference to record information. It is suggested that teachers who are just beginning with conferences try and meet with approximately half the class each week. As the teacher grows more comfortable, however, it is recommended that this time increase to one time a week with each conference being 5 to 10 minutes in length. This will provide an accurate assessment of a student's progress.

Portfolios are often used in nongraded classrooms as a type of assessment. A portfolio is "an organized collection of student work and self-reflections that helps paint a portrait of the whole child" (Hill, 1994, p.21). It is not just a collection of work. It is the process of collecting, selecting, and reflecting upon the learning that has taken place. A portfolio can show the growth of a child over a period of time. Portfolios can include writing samples, audio or video tapes, photographs of projects, reading logs, or anything else that the student and teacher believe is significant. Cardboard boxes, scrapbooks, binders, or separate folders for each child make good portfolios. While some teachers find it easier to keep only one type of portfolio, others prefer to use

several for each child. In the working portfolio, student, parent, and teacher all contribute work. In this way, all aspects of the student are presented. It shows samples that display daily progress. On the other hand, the showcase portfolio is limited to the student's best work. Process pieces are not included. This type of portfolio does not represent the whole child. Record-keeping portfolios are used by the teacher who does not keep a working portfolio for each student. In this type of portfolio, the teacher keeps assessment and evaluation samples that are not chosen by the student (Batzle, 1992).

Parent preparation and involvement

As mentioned earlier, one of the reasons that nongraded education was not easily accepted in the past was because of tradition. Most people, including parents, were taught in single-grade classrooms and wanted their children taught in the same way. However, if change to a nongraded school is occurring, there are ways that parents can be involved in the process to make them feel more comfortable. First, it is important that everyone who works for the school maintains good relationships with the public, especially parents. The philosophy behind nongraded classrooms along with decisions and changes should be explained thoroughly to the public (Anderson, 1993). A meeting defining nongradedness and explaining the rationale

and benefits should be held in the first month of school. Parents must know their role in the program. Questions and concerns ought to be addressed at this time also. Honesty and sincerity are crucial if nongraded classrooms are going to be accepted.

A school handbook is a must in any school but especially in a nongraded school. A handbook should include not only the rules, calendar, map, floor plan, and other common features of a handbook, but information on its organization and philosophy as well. This way, the parents will have a reference available if they have any questions.

There is probably no better way to get parents to understand nongraded classrooms than to invite them to volunteer in the classroom. Teachers can simply ask the parents of the children in their classroom to help in that certain classroom or the whole school could develop a list of where help is needed. A survey can then be sent to parents to complete as to what times and projects are best for them. In this way, talents that might not have been known can be used to benefit everyone (Anderson, 1993).

As the school year progresses, meetings should be held on a regular basis updating parents on current research and informing them of other topics and how they can help their child. Topics could include self-esteem, discipline, and problem-solving.

Sending newsletters home is yet another way to include parents in their child's education. Newsletters should be written with the parents' interests in mind. Sections could include information on child development, art work or stories by the children, current events at the school, and interviews of staff members.

Parents should also be involved in homework. Homework connects what is learned at school with the home. It is up to the teacher to extend the day's lessons into the home. Students could read to someone at home, write letters or stories, make puppets, or bake. Parents must understand what is expected of them and their children and why homework is important. In some cases, parents do not want to be involved with homework. If this is true, other alternatives for homework would need to be arranged. However, if homework is shared with the family, there can be a better understanding of not only what is learned at school, but how it is learned as well(Grant, 1995).

#### Knowledge and inservice

Before changing to a nongraded school, one thing is apparent. Just as in any school, there must be many staff development opportunities if the nongraded school is going to succeed. Teachers need to be knowledgeable in whole language. Experience with manipulatives, hands-on projects, cooperative learning, and other related topics is

necessary. Staff should visit other nongraded schools to obtain ideas about routines, schedules, room arrangements, and other logistical matters. They can also get ideas about support systems for the teachers and how students and parents are responding. In addition, this is a wonderful chance to ask questions about any uncertainties.

Throughout the year, it is recommended that a certain amount of time during staff meetings be devoted to questions or concerns pertaining to nongradedness.

Furthermore, it would be beneficial if teachers attended workshops on the topic. Any opportunity to learn more about or to improve upon the nongraded classroom ought to be taken (Anderson, 1993).

#### Summary

Implementing a nongraded classroom can be difficult in the beginning. The public may not be readily accepting of the idea. After all, the nongraded classroom was not popular in the past and is not common today. Likewise, teachers might be hesitant to relinquish old habits and traditional ways of teaching. Many years of teaching have provided them with a comfortable routine. Nevertheless, because of the diversity of children and the rate at which they develop, it is apparent that the graded classroom is not the answer for children of today's society. Instead, the nongraded classroom, with its span of age groups,

flexibility, hands-on learning, integrated curriculum, and authentic assessment is more appropriate. In addition, current research indicates that most children in nongraded classrooms perform better academically, socially, and emotionally. Although the process of changing to a nongraded classroom and possibly a nongraded school can be a long one, it can be successful for everyone involved with proper preparation.



## Chapter Three

### Goals and Objectives

One goal of this project is to make people aware of the fact that children not only come from different backgrounds but vary in their stages of development as well. Some may progress more quickly or at a slower pace than others. Therefore, it is necessary that modifications are made in what is known as public education.

Another goal of this project is to explain some of the changes and progress being made in public education including the revival of the nongraded classroom. When everyone involved in the education field understands the philosophy that supports the ideas that are becoming more apparent in the classroom today and are especially part of the nongraded classroom, students will be taught more effectively. Teachers and administrators must be able to support their ideas with current research so they explain them to the public. The public will be much more accepting of nongraded classrooms if the concept is fully explained.

A third goal of this project is to create enthusiasm for teachers who are ready and anxious for a change. So often teachers are frustrated with not only the number of students they have in their classrooms, but with the variety of levels at which those students learn as well. The information in this project will provide

teachers with answers to some of their long-time frustrations and give them new resources to use in their classrooms.

In addition to these goals, the main objective of this project is to furnish teachers with a manual on how to change to a nongraded classroom. This manual will include information on how to organize a nongraded classroom, curriculum ideas, assessment procedures and forms, and how to involve parents.

#### Limitations of the Project

Despite the positive research and success involved with multigrade classrooms, they do have some limitations. These include age range, lack of support, and more planning time.

One shortcoming is the age range. All of the research in this project indicates that currently multigrade classrooms are in the primary grades. The grades beyond the primary years are still accustomed to grade levels determined by age. Therefore, it would be difficult for children who have been in classrooms with a variety of ages to adjust to the traditional school setting and peers their own age.

Another limitation is lack of support for the nongraded classroom. Not everyone agrees with the idea. There must be total support from the public,

administration, and teachers if the program is going to work.

A third limitation is the extra time and amount of work. Nongraded classrooms are based on the whole language philosophy. It takes more time to plan this type of instruction as compared to paper and pencil or textbook activities. Furthermore, teachers will have children in their classes for two or more years. Therefore, curriculum will have to be different each year. This will be an adjustment and more work for teachers who are used to teaching the same thing each year.

## Appendix A

### Changing to A Nongraded Classroom

Sheryl Pross has been teaching a nongraded classroom for several years. She stated the following:

"Teaching a nongraded classroom is great! It's the best change I've ever made! I was both anxious and scared to change to a nongraded classroom, but I hope I never have to teach anything else. I prefer it to a traditional classroom because it is more family-centered and I am able to teach at developmental levels. The kids also respect each other more. I am so much happier since I began teaching in a nongraded classroom. I feel like I am meeting the needs of the children more effectively. I was apprehensive about trying something new, but I am so glad I did"(1996).

This is what a teacher who teaches a nongraded classroom has to say about the idea. She agrees, like any change, that it is frightening and overwhelming at first. However, if you have been selected to teach in a nongraded classroom or perhaps you opted for the change, there are certain things that will help you ease into the transition. These include knowing the history of nongraded education, current research on nongraded education, how to set up your own classroom, how to prepare for reactions from the public, and how to involve parents in your classroom.

## History of Graded Education

First of all, before you can justify the good of nongraded education, you must be able to explain the history of graded education to parents and the public. Remember, people in general are resistant to change. Most learned in a traditional setting and expect their children to be taught in the same way. Knowing how and why graded education was initiated and why some aspects of it may be detrimental for some children will be helpful in defending your stand for nongraded education.

Long before our traditional educational system existed, one-room schools filled with children of various ages were common. Children learned from each other as well as the teacher. It was Horace Mann, Secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education, who was seeking a way to organize schools into a system that could handle the large number of European immigrants that were flooding into America that changed the practice of the one-room schools. After visiting Prussia, Mann was impressed by the way children there were organized into grades by their chronological ages. He believed that this was the answer to making American schools more efficient. After all, teachers did not have any special training. Grouping children by grades would allow the teacher to teach the

same thing to each child in turn making the job easier and more efficient(Grant & Johnson, 1995).

However, throughout the remainder of the 19th century, it became apparent that graded education was not meeting the needs of the children. Not only did children come from different backgrounds, they learned at different rates and in different ways. What worked for one child might not work for another. Despite the fact that some students were being reached, others were bored because the material they were learning was too easy while others were failing because the material was too difficult (Gaustad, 1992).

#### Advent of Nongraded Education

The call for improvement of public education began in the 1930's and continued through the 1950's and into the early 1970's. In 1959, the book, the Nongraded School, by Goodlad and Anderson was published. In it contained studies and research supporting the idea of nongraded programs. They argued that "grouping children homogeneously on the basis of a single criterion such as age does not reliably produce a group that is homogeneous on other criteria relevant to teaching and learning(Katz, 1990, p. viii). Thus began the implementation of what many schools called nongradedness. Team-teaching and individualized instruction was seen in some schools as were

other programs associated with nongraded instruction such as open education (Miller, 1991).

Despite the fact that research promotes nongraded education, some people may argue that nongraded education was tried before and failed. As a teacher in a nongraded classroom, you may need to explain that nongraded education was tried before. However, its decline was not because nongraded education was bad but because of other circumstances. The reasons for the failure was attributed to many things such as poor definition, insufficient training, lack of support, and tradition.

First, people did not have a true understanding of the definition of nongradedness. According to Pratt(1986), in some cases, graded schools divided age groups into "tracks", thus providing what was thought to be more individualized instruction. In other schools, walls were removed to allow teachers to team-teach. Furthermore, some schools eliminated grade distinctions but still practiced the same philosophies of a graded school. In reality, although schools were claiming to be nongraded, the structure of a graded classroom still remained the same.

Another reason for failure was the lack of training teachers received. First, teachers were trained to teach to a specific grade level. By assuming that all children in the same grade were at the same level, whole classroom



instruction became easy and teachers only had to learn a certain amount of material. Teaching, using a nongraded approach, was not only more time-consuming, it was not part of any prior experience or training.

Still, another explanation for failure was the lack of support that nongraded education received. Besides the extra planning time, there were textbook companies and standardized testing to encounter. Textbook companies, thriving on making a profit, produced material designed for each specific grade level. Textbooks, workbooks, and ditto sheets became a main part of determining school curriculum. Secondly, standardized testing, originally developed to identify retarded children, eventually was put to use to determine the "normal" ability of children at a certain age and grade level. Gaustad(1992) stated the following:

The quantitative format of standardized tests dovetails neatly with the concept of classifying students by grade levels. Unfortunately, the validity of tests is questionable for young children. Children are erratic test takers; results can vary greatly depending on the child's mood, reaction to the test-taker, and even ability to control a pencil" (p.7).

Yet, schools came to depend on this mode of assessment.

Finally, the fact that graded education has existed for over a century is a strong reason that it still

continues today. People, including parents, teachers, and administrators are familiar with it because it was the way they were taught. Their philosophy is that it worked for them so it will work for others. In addition, training and curriculum were based on graded education. Again, it just seemed like the natural way to teach.

#### Revival of Nongraded Education

Since the development of graded classrooms, educators and researchers such as Maria Montessori, John Dewey, Jean Piaget, and Howard Gardner have studied child development. They concluded that children learn best if they are actively involved in what they are learning and are able to explore and discover things by themselves. Furthermore, not all children progress at the same pace and in the same way. Educators are now accepting the idea that children are best served in a group that is heterogeneous with a variety of interest and abilities. As time goes on, more and more educators are also agreeing that classrooms be filled with activity and conversation as opposed to quiet classrooms where children sit all day and do work with little or no interaction. Current research further indicates that nongraded education has academic, social, and emotional benefits (Grant and Johnson, 1995).

Research involving the cognitive aspect of nongraded classrooms produced confusing and inconclusive results.

For example, some research reviewed by Bruce Miller(1990) indicated that students in nongraded classrooms performed consistently higher in mathematics, reading, and language. However, in eight other studies, no difference was found between nongraded and graded classroom academic performance. Miller's research also reported studies by Rule which indicated that in reading, students from nongraded classrooms performed significantly higher than those in graded classrooms. However, in mathematics, the results were reversed with students in graded classrooms scoring higher than those in nongraded classrooms. Furthermore, according to Morris, Proger, and Morrell(1971), studies conducted by Robert Carbone found that there was greater achievement in the students from graded classrooms as compared to those of nongraded classrooms.

Yet, Barbara Pavan(1992)states that after reviewing sixty-four studies published between 1968 and 1990, she found that fifty-seven used standardized achievement tests to compare nongraded and graded classrooms. Of those studies, 52 or 91 percent indicated that the nongraded groups performed better (58 percent) or as well as (33 percent) the graded groups in the area of academic achievement. Nongraded students did worse than graded students in only 9 percent of the studies. Likewise,

studies showed that students who were in a nongraded program for a number of years performed better academically, while seven studies revealed that student who spent all of their elementary years in the same nongraded school rated far better than those students who went to a traditional school for the same length of time.

Even more research suggested that black students, underachievers, low socioeconomic students, and boys especially benefit from being in a nongraded classroom. In 18 of the reports reviewed by Pavan(1992), all but one showed that boys and black students in nongraded schools scored higher on achievement tests than those in graded schools. Furthermore, underachievers and students of lower socioeconomic status also showed greater academic achievement when placed in nongraded schools.

In addition to academic benefits, nongraded classrooms provide social benefits as well. Children in nongraded classrooms are more likely to exhibit several social behaviors such as leadership and responsibility than children who are in a traditional graded classroom simply because of the variety of ages that are present. For example, Katz (1990) reports that French, Waas, Stright, and Baker, observed children in both mixed and same-age groups during a decision-making process related to classroom activities. They discovered that the older

children in the multi-age group tended to exhibit leadership behaviors while assisting in group processes. In another similar study, according to Katz, (1990), Stright and French observed seven and nine year olds and nine and eleven year olds sequencing a set of pictures. They noticed that the older children in each group organized and encouraged the participation of the younger children. Stright and French further stated that children find it difficult to be leaders in a group of peers. Yet, leadership roles occur naturally when younger children are mixed with older children.

In addition to Katz's findings, Kasten and Clarke(1993) observed a kindergarten child who had no social skills, had no idea that letters or words existed, and was a potential behavior problem. A year later, after being in a nongraded classroom, the same child was more responsible and more mature. The teacher believed that it was because the older students did not allow the immature behavior to continue. Furthermore, the older children served as good role models. Consequently, the evidence suggests that nongraded classrooms provide an appropriate environment for increasing leadership skills and responsibility in children.

Not only does the nongraded classroom benefit children in social ways, it has emotional advantages as well.

According to Barbara Pavan(1992), a mental health section was included in 42 of the studies she reviewed. Attitudes toward school, self-esteem, and school anxiety were measured. It was clear that the students in nongraded classrooms had a better attitude toward school than those in graded classrooms. In fact, 52 percent of the studies verified that nongraded classrooms were better for students while 43 percent found no difference. Only 5 percent indicated that nongraded schools were worse when it came to measuring attitudes, self-esteem, and anxiety toward school. In concurrence with Pavan is Bruce Miller(1991). In the studies that he reviewed, 21 measures were used to assess attitudes toward school. It was discovered that 81 percent of the students preferred the nongraded classroom over a graded one.

Furthermore, in his article, Miller cites studies by Milburn. He found that children of all ages in a nongraded school had a more positive attitude toward school than those in a school with single grades. In the same article, Sherman and Milburn discovered that students in a nongraded classroom had a better self-concept when compared to students of a graded classroom. Moreover, Sherman determined that students in a nongraded classroom had stronger relationships with each other while Mycock found that students and teachers were closer in a nongraded

situation. For the most part, studies indicated that children in nongraded classrooms were more apt to have better attitudes toward themselves, each other, and school. (Miller, 1990). Because of the research, more and more material was written to assist schools in changing to a nongraded structure.

### Changing to a Nongraded School

#### Class composition

There are several ways in which a nongraded classroom can be created. Some of these are grouping by age, compatibility with the teacher and other children, and random selection. For a teacher teaching a nongraded classroom for the first time, it may be easier to select children who you have had in your classroom before. For example, if you previously taught kindergarten or first grade and will be teaching 6, 7, and 8-year-olds, choose some students that you had in your classroom that you think would work well in a nongraded classroom. Be sure to select children with different academic and social profiles and diverse abilities and interests. Simply choosing the students who you thought were the smartest and the ones you liked the best may not be the best idea. Instead, select students who work well both independently and cooperatively.

You can also rely on teacher recommendation in creating a nongraded classroom. Again, remind the teacher that the selected students must be able to work well with other students and that they should have a variety of interests and abilities. Furthermore, it is important that the children in the classroom get along with one another but are not distracted by each other. This could occur if children who are really good friends are placed together. Children who do not get along and continually bother one another may also create problems. Whatever the technique used to compose the class, the Kentucky Department of Education(1991) recommends that administration, counselors, parents, and other support staff sometimes be involved in the process.

#### Classroom materials and organization

After reading literature, attending conferences, and observing classrooms, you will be excited about arranging your classroom. Remember, because children learn best by discovering things on their own and by manipulating, your classroom should be stocked with a variety of manipulatives and hands-on materials. Although, you may be anxious to do everything and buy everything at once, that may be overwhelming for both you and the children. It would be smart to begin with a few basic items such as books, magazines, and other reading material. Maps, globes, and



computers would also be helpful if possible. Items such as pattern blocks, unifix cubes, tangrams, educational games, puzzles, blocks, or other manipulatives can be introduced one-at-a-time or as needed for specific activities should be included. These materials are generally stored in areas on the outside of the room such as on shelves or on small tables. The middle of the room should be kept clear for walking as students need to get around to different groups or activities.

Because your students will be working in both and small and large groups, desks are usually arranged in small groups facing one another. Since students are arranged this way, they are more likely to interact with one another. Your students need to be aware of what interaction is acceptable and what is not. It is your responsibility to make your students attentive of the routine and rules of the classroom. By having structure with rules and routines, your classroom will run more smoothly. Furthermore, it is better if students are included in developing the rules so they sense that they have ownership of the classroom.

Flexible grouping strategies are a must in a nongraded classroom. The arrangement of groups will depend on the activity you are doing. For instance, if you are teaching or reinforcing a skill that certain students may need or

doing a project that requires students to be of similar backgrounds such as a neighborhood project, then it makes sense to group the students homogeneously. Heterogeneous grouping, on the other hand, consists of students who vary in sex, abilities, race, or age. In this case, children are able to learn from each other and their differences. In addition, heterogeneous grouping lends itself to cooperative learning, "an extensively researched instructional method in which students are heterogeneously grouped to produce academic and social gains. Students are individually accountable for their learning, yet also experience a sense of interdependency for the success of their group" (Davis, 1992, p.22). Heterogeneous grouping can be used for any project that you have planned where you want students to work together.

As the teacher, you will usually not be sitting at your desk. Instead, you will be wandering around the room assisting and observing or conferencing with individual students. By doing this as opposed to standing in front of the classroom lecturing, you not only allow the children to learn and discover on their own, but you also gain knowledge on how they learn and on their strong and weak areas. In addition, through observation and conferencing, you will obtain information about future curriculum planning. According to Yetta Goodman (1985), the teacher's

role in a nongraded classroom is a significant one. As a teacher, as you observe, you gain information for planning new experiences or instructional activities. "Observation, evaluation, and curriculum planning go hand-in-hand (Goodman,1985,p.18). Overall, although it may appear that the job as a teacher in a nongraded classroom is an easy one, it is a job that requires a large amount of planning and organization.

### Curriculum

Developing your own curriculum is a necessity in a nongraded classroom. Remember, what goes on in your classroom should be flexible and involve the children in a variety of ways. Because children learn best through discovery and hands-on experiences, an abundance of activities where children are actively involved are necessary. When curriculum includes a variety of activities that are exciting and meaningful, students are more excited and involved in the learning process. You must also keep in mind that children have different learning styles;they do not learn in the same way. In fact, seven different learning styles have been identified by Howard Gardner, professor of education at Harvard University. They include linguistic(intelligence of words), mathematical(intelligence of numbers and reasoning), musical(intelligence of tone and rhythm),

spatial(intelligence of pictures and images), bodily-kinesthetic(intelligence of the whole body), interpersonal(intelligence of social understanding), and intrapersonal(intelligence of self knowledge) (Armstrong,1994). Typically, our traditional educational system promotes the linguistic and mathematical intelligences. Unfortunately, not all children comprehend concepts in these ways.

One way to increase involvement by students and teachers is to use thematic units when designing your curriculum. By using themes, you will not only include a variety of activities and the different learning styles, but students will have the opportunity to learn and use the skills of learning to learn. They will have more time for self-discovery and will learn the process of making a product better. In traditional skill and drill lessons, this was not often the case. To begin selecting a theme, consider what has previously been taught at each grade level. Although textbooks may be used as a reference, they should not be the sole determiner of your curriculum. Textbooks provide some information about a topic, but information is limited. In addition, publishers of textbooks do not know the children in your classroom or their needs. The best and safest way to plan what you need to be teaching is to check your school's curriculum guide

for each grade level. Then, you will need to search and dig for activities that correspond with the guide. You can also ask teachers what they have taught before. Ask them what needs to be taught in subjects such as mathematics, science, and social studies. You can get ideas from them, but in the end, you will have to decide what is best for you.

### Assessment

Assessment plays a major part in the nongraded classroom. Authentic assessment is the term most often heard in a nongraded classroom. In place of pencil and paper assessments and standardized tests are things such as surveys, anecdotal records, conferencing, and portfolios. Examples of forms on these topics and how to use them are found in several resources such as Hill and Ruptic's (1994) Practical Aspects of Authentic Assessment: Putting the Pieces Together and Rhodes (1993) Literacy Assessment: A Handbook of Instruments.

In order for you to better know your students' interests, strengths, and weaknesses, it is helpful for them to complete a survey. Types of surveys include interest and attitude. Interest surveys can provide you with information about the child's home, friends, or other interests such as sports or other activities. You can then use this information to suggest books to read, topics for

stories, or just about anything. In some surveys you or someone else will have to complete them with a younger child who is not able to read or write. This would be a good way to use parent volunteers. When completed, however, you will gain a lot of useful information from the survey. In addition to interest surveys, attitude surveys can also provide you with information about the children in your class. By having your students complete these, you will discover the importance that certain subjects have in their lives. It doesn't matter what type of survey you use, they both provide information in a short amount of time(Hill, 1994).

Anecdotal records are another type of authentic assessment. They are simply brief notes written about a student based on observation. They will encourage you to become a more active observer and listener. By using anecdotal records, you will be able to evaluate students' learning to determine if they need extra assistance or extra challenge, make instructional decisions, provide documentation, and monitor patterns in behavior. Anecdotal records will even allow you to evaluate your own teaching. Information that is recorded might include specific behaviors in a variety of contexts, choices of activities and friends, skills or strategies a student might use, and

comments that a student makes. You may even want to record some skills or strategies taught to a particular student.

Anecdotal records may be kept in a notebook with a section for each child, in individual folders, on file cards, or on a computer disk. Notes can also be written on post-it notes or on computer labels and then later transferred to folders or a notebook. The significant things to remember about anecdotal records are to date everything, be specific, and be brief. Only report what is observed. Do not add your own opinion(Hill, 1994). Although it may take some time getting in the habit of writing anecdotal records, once you are, you will see the benefits immediately and will realize how valuable they really are.

In addition to surveys and anecdotal records, checklists can also be used for assessment. You may find that checklists are more convenient when focusing on specific skills and behaviors. For instance, in assessing reading, an item on a checklist might be, "uses picture clues." If the student is using picture clues while reading, then you would check and date that column on the checklist. Checklists are an easy way to assess because the essential comments or stages of development are already recorded. Like anecdotal records, checklists will allow you to decide if a child needs extra help or needs to be

challenged. They also provide documentation. You might find it helpful if the students use checklists to evaluate their own work. In editing a paper, for example, a checklist might include items such as "name on paper", "read to yourself", and "names capitalized." Checklists can be used for just about anything you desire(Hill, 1994).

Conferencing is still another type of authentic assessment. Conferencing allows you to speak with and review student progress on an individual basis. You will probably use all the information gathered from your anecdotal records and checklists during the conference. In addition, you may use other forms. You might find it difficult at first to conference with all of your students once a week. In the beginning, start with approximately half the class until you are comfortable. After that, it is recommended that this time increase to one time a week with each conference being 5 to 10 minutes in length. This will provide an accurate assessment of a student's progress.

Portfolios are still another type of authentic assessment often used in nongraded classrooms. A portfolio is "an organized collection of student work and self-reflections that helps paint a portrait of the whole child" (Hill,1994,p.24). A portfolio, however, is more than just a collection of work. It is the process of collecting,



selecting, and reflecting upon the learning that has taken place. A portfolio can show the growth of a student over a period of time. Portfolios can include writing samples, audio or video tapes, photographs of projects, reading logs, or anything else that you and your students may believe is significant and helpful in making assessments. Cardboard boxes, scrapbooks, binders, or separate folders for each child make good portfolios.

While some teachers find it easier to keep only one portfolio, you may prefer to use more than one for each child in your classroom. The three types from which you may choose are the working portfolio, the showcase portfolio, and the record-keeping portfolio. In the working portfolio, the student, parent, and teacher all contribute work. In this way, all aspects of the student are presented. It shows samples that display daily progress. On the other hand, the showcase portfolio is limited to the student's best work. Process pieces are not included. This type of portfolio does not represent the whole child. Furthermore, record-keeping portfolios can also be used. You may want to use these if you do not keep a working portfolio for each student. In this case, you keep the assessment and evaluation samples that are not chosen by the student. You might also wish to keep anecdotal records, checklists, and conferencing forms in

the record-keeping portfolio(Batzle, 1992). It may take some time to find the portfolios that work best for you, but once you do, you will most likely discover that they are an excellent way of keeping track of the progress that a student makes.

#### Parent preparation and involvement

As mentioned earlier, one of the reasons that nongraded education was not easily accepted in the past was because of tradition. Most people, including parents were used to single-grade classrooms and saw no reason for change. In order for your nongraded program to be more readily accepted, you must involve the parents and the public in the change. One of the most important things you can do is to maintain good relationships with them. The philosophy behind nongraded classrooms along with decisions and changes should be explained in depth(Anderson, 1993). An easy way to inform the public about nongraded education is to have a meeting at the beginning of the school year. During the meeting, you or your principal can define the term nongradedness and explain the rationale and benefits. Be prepared to answer questions and address concerns at this time. You should be very honest and sincere about beginning a nongraded program. Do not be afraid to voice some of your concerns. The parents will more readily accept you and what you are doing if you are honest. In

addition to the meeting at the beginning of the school year, it would be a good idea to hold frequent meetings during the year to update parents on current research and inform them of similar topics and how they can help their child. Topics could include self-esteem, discipline, problem-solving.

Some type of letter or handbook should be sent home by you at the beginning of the year to explain procedures in your classroom. By sending this, parents will have a reference available if they have any questions.

Probably one of the best ways to involve parents in the classroom and to help them better understand your classroom, is to invite them to volunteer. It is suggested that a survey be sent home for the parents to complete as to what times and projects are best for them. In this way, talents that might not have been known can be used to benefit everyone. You can use parents to work individually with students or with small groups who need extra help in certain areas or to be there to help students while you are conferencing. Parents can also share information that they have on a certain topic. For example, if you are studying about small animals and one of your parents is a veterinarian, you may want to have him or her come and speak to the class. Other talents and careers should be shared as well. Remember, the more parents are involved

and the more positive things they see happening in your classroom, the more readily they will accept you and your program!

Another way to involve parents is through homework. Your homework should connect what is learned at school with the home. It is up to you to extend the day's lessons into the home. Students could read to someone at home, write letters or stories, make puppets, or bake. These are just a few suggestions. You might want to start out with just reading and writing until you get to know your students better. Whatever you assign for homework, parents must understand what is expected of them and their children and why the homework is important. In some cases, parents do not want to be involved with homework. If this is true, other alternatives for homework would need to be arranged. However, if homework is shared with the family, there can be a better understanding of not only what is learned at school, but how it is learned as well (Grant and Johnson, 1995).

#### Knowledge and inservice

Before changing to a nongraded school, certain steps need to be taken. The first, to make the entire community understand the concept of nongradedness was already discussed. Next, it is recommended that you and other staff visit established nongraded schools to obtain ideas

about routines, schedules, room arrangements, and other logistical matters. When you visit, you may also get an idea of the support system that is available for the teachers, how the students feel about the school, how teachers work together, and how they solve problems. Taking pictures is always a good idea for things you want to remember such as learning centers or other arrangements in the room. Be sure to have a list of questions ready about any uncertainties you might have.

Besides visiting other schools, there must be many staff development opportunities if the nongraded school is going to succeed. First, teachers need to be knowledgeable in whole language and how children learn. Experience with manipulatives, hands-on projects, cooperative learning, and other related topics are all excellent topics for staff development. Throughout the year, it is suggested that a certain amount of time during staff meetings be devoted to questions and answers pertaining to nongradedness. Furthermore, it would be beneficial if you and other teachers wanting to learn more about nongradedness attend workshops as often as possible. Any opportunity, to learn more about or to improve your nongraded classroom, including reading articles and books, ought to be taken. The more you are exposed to the topic of nongraded

education, the more you will learn. You will be a better teacher! (Anderson and Pavan, 1993).

#### Summary

If you are just beginning your nongraded classroom, it is only natural to be frightened and unsure about what you are doing. After all, nongraded education fights the traditional public education system. Parents and others may resist the change and create problems. But, if you are educated about the nongraded classroom, with its span of age groups, flexibility, hands-on learning, integrated curriculum, authentic assessment, and the current research that indicates that most children in nongraded classrooms perform better in all areas, then your transition should go more smoothly. The most important thing you can do is to continue to learn all about the nongraded classroom that you can and do not be afraid if something fails. Change things that are not working. You can be successful if you are willing to persevere! This project can get you started and give you some ideas, but in the end, like your classroom now, you will adapt things for your own expectations and necessities.

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