The Art Teacher and Multi-Age Homeroom Teachers: Qualitative Observations and Comparisons

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Abstract

Multi-age classrooms feature the intentional grouping of students from consecutive grade levels for the purpose of fostering a nurturing classroom atmosphere. While an abundance of research on multi-age education has been produced throughout the past 50 years, only recent efforts have seen researchers turn their attention to the experiences of art teachers working with mixed-age groups. The purpose of this article is to characterize the qualities of mixed-age instruction for an art teacher and a group of homeroom teachers through the collection of qualitative observations and interviews at a selected school site, with the intent of describing the congruities and incongruities in their instructional practices and organizational strategies. The results detail subtle organizational differences, yet congruent practices related to thematic instruction and cooperative learning, and emergent findings related to the importance of forming communities of multi-age practice and adopting an ethic of caring.

Prologue

A quilt hung on the classroom wall. Child-sized handprints had been pressed around a large red heart patched into the center of the quilt. A message across its surface read:

> *Love & Kindness*
> *To Mrs. Barnes, Mrs. Glenda, Mrs. Kahan*
> *From the Cooperation Crew's 1st Year*

I found the quilt displayed in a central classroom (see Figure 1) that connected to three other rooms (see Figure 2) used by a group of students collectively known as the Cooperation Crew. I entered the door labeled with Mrs. Barnes' name, and found students standing in a circle, singing to morning music, and offering friendly greetings to one another. The class was diverse in a number of ways, with a fairly even mix of cultural diversity, but also with an unusually obvious height differential between some students. As the music finished, students sat down on the floor and Mrs. Barnes settled them into their morning routine.

Figure 1. The Cooperation Crew quilt.

Figure 2. The central classroom, with doors leading to Mrs. Barnes' and Mrs. Glenda's class spaces.

I took a glimpse at all three classrooms that were homes to the Cooperation Crew, and quickly noticed several commonalties: each classroom featured students with noticeable height differentials, and none contained isolated desks placed in traditional rows. Instead, larger tables were used to reinforce group interaction. In Mrs. Kahan's room, a colorful bulletin board with the title, "Florida Kids", caught my attention. The display featured individual photographs of students mounted on worksheets that required responses to autobiographically-framed questions (see Figure 3). A quick scan of the answers revealed interesting information, especially to those not familiar with the organizational structure of the Cooperation Crew. The birth dates of the students spanned a range of three or four consecutive years, and nowhere on the bulletin board did it mention the assigned grade levels of any particular student.

Figure 3. The *Florida Kids* bulletin board.

The story above offers a brief glimpse at the morning routines and classroom environment of the Cooperation Crew, a team-taught multi-age class consisting of students traditionally labeled as kindergartners, first graders, and second graders. The purpose of this article is to share the results of a qualitative research project initiated to characterize the qualities of multi-age instruction for a group of homeroom teachers and an art teacher at a specially selected school site, with the intention of describing the congruities and incongruities in their instructional practices and organizational strategies.

Background

Multi-age learning environments are loosely defined by the intentional grouping of students from consecutive grade levels for the purpose of fostering a classroom culture modeled on characteristics of caring families and nurturing communities (Nishida, 2009; Trani & Irvine, 2010). A central tenet of multi-age instruction involves the emphasis of mixed-age collaboration over individual competition (Hyry-Beihammer & Hascher, 2015; Ritland & Eighmy, 2013; Smit & Engeli, 2015). Many larger multi-age classes, such as the Cooperation Crew, are taught by teams of teachers that use multiple classroom spaces that connect to form a "house" or pod for the multi-age "family" (Anderson & Pavan, 1993). This extra class space and the presence of multiple instructors allows for greater opportunities in rearranging – or *flexibly regrouping* – students by their interests, developmental levels, or for subject area instruction (Alessi, Hoyne, & Stewart 2006; Ritland & Eighmy, 2013).

Like other multi-age instructors, the homeroom teachers of the Cooperation Crew *looped* (Ball, Grant, & Johnson, 2006), or remained with their students, for a predetermined period of years as a way to cultivate deeper relationships and instructional continuity in a family-like environment (Ritland & Eighmy, 2013; Trani & Irvine, 2010). For the Cooperation Crew, a newly enrolled kindergartener would stay with the same multi-age teachers for three years until he or she was at a level traditionally categorized as third grade. During this three-year span, students still progressed from simple to more complex concepts, however the pace of this advancement was not strictly delineated by grade level, but rather each student's own developmental readiness (Smit & Engeli, 2015; Trani & Irvine, 2010). Multi-age instruction often revolves around selected themes of interest to students' lives, with appropriate interdisciplinary connections made between the chosen themes and a variety of subject areas (Ritland & Eighmy, 2013; Smit & Engeli, 2015; Trani & Irvine, 2010).

Throughout the past 50 years, educational scholars have produced an abundance of research on multi-age education (Ball, 2006). However, studies on the experiences of art teachers working at multi-age school sites have been few and far between, occurring sporadically over the past 15 years (Broome, 2016; Broome, Heid, Johnston, & Serig, 2015; Heid 2004; Heid, Estabrook, & Nostrant, 2009; Serig 1995). In my own previous research, I have used surveys to obtain a broad view of the practices and perceptions of multi-age art teachers (Broome, 2009a) and also conducted in-depth qualitative observations with an art teacher as she instructed multi-age groups (Broome, 2009b). The subject of these past observations, as well as the majority of survey respondents (58.33%), worked at schools operating under a team-taught model, and many (48.65%) experienced instances where the flexible regrouping practices of team teachers resulted in inconsistent art rosters that changed as students moved from homeroom teacher to homeroom teacher. The results of my past research also suggest that additional observations are needed to address unexplored facets of multi-age education, such as the working relationships between multi-age homeroom teachers and assigned art teachers, with particular emphasis placed on the congruity of their practices. With this focus in mind, I initiated a new research project involving qualitative observations and interviews with a team of multi-age homeroom teachers and the art teacher who worked with their mixed-age students in her art room.

Theoretical Perspectives

Several socio-constructivist frameworks, including ideas posited by John Dewey and Lev Vygotsky, are useful in understanding the potential benefits of the collaborative environments that serve as centerpieces of multi-age education (Jurkovic, 2001; Roberts & Eady, 2012; Smit & Engeli, 2015; Smit, Hyry-Beihammer, & Raggl, 2015). Dewey rejected traditional views of truth and knowledge that had been held by philosophy and science for centuries (Menand, 2001). He did not conceptualize truth as a fixed entity waiting out there to be discovered in

the universe, nor did he see people as passive observers of the truth. Instead, people were seen as active participants who made meaning through their interactions with each other and their environment (Dewey, 1938/1997). This pragmatic socio-constructivist worldview runs counter-current to traditional practices in U.S. schooling where students are frequently expected to do assignments without much social interaction (Roberts & Eady, 2012) and often in individually isolated desks (Kasten & Lolli, 1998). More recently, this traditional emphasis on isolated learning experiences has been further exacerbated by the competitive nature of high-stakes standardized testing (Chapman, 2005a; Tymms & Merrell, 2007). In contrast, the tenets of multi-age education count on collaboration, and differentiation in students' abilities – rather than standardized uniformity – is prized and expected as well (Hyry-Beihammer & Hascher, 2015; Ritland & Eighmy, 2013).

For Vygotsky (1978), the *zone of proximal development* is the difference between a student's predetermined mental age and the level that he/she is able to achieve in collaboration with more capable peers. A related term, *scaffolding*, is used as a metaphor to describe the process that takes place when a tutor or expert helps another individual with less experience in specific problem solving activities (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976). An older or more advanced partner may serve as a foundation on which less experienced members can stand upon to reach new levels of co-constructed knowledge that they may not have gained when acting alone.

While the socio-constructivist ideas of Dewey and Vygotsky are frequently associated with the underpinnings of multi-age classrooms, two additional frameworks – Nel Noddings' *ethic of caring* (1988) and Wenger's *communities of practice* (Wenger, 1998) – unexpectedly emerged in this study as beneficial concepts in explaining the ways that the multi-age homeroom teachers and the art teacher interacted with each other and prepared for mixed-age groups in their classes. In Noddings' view (2005), the focus of schooling has taken a definitive turn toward the teaching of basic academic skills – and away from moral aims – during the latter half of the 20th century. In reaction Noddings called for a revitalization of moral education, but through new alternative approaches that focused on an ethic of caring. Crucial components to this approach included (a) the modeling of caring behaviors through positive interactions with others, (b) the promotion of authentic dialogue in which both parties truly listen without predetermined outcomes, (c) opportunities for students to practice caring toward one another through collaborative work, and (d) the confirmation of the best attributes of students as nurtured through teacher-student relationships that last beyond the typical one year of academic engagement.

Communities of practice – a term first coined by Lave and Wenger (1991) – are formed when practitioners from a common domain with shared concerns interact on a regular basis for

collective learning and refinement of skills toward a specific endeavor (Wenger, 1998). Such communities represent more than a simple club revolving around a theme of shared interest, as membership is defined by a level of experience and expertise within the selected domain (Wenger & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). It is important that members in such groups take the time to learn from each other and build relationships, as merely working in the same industry does not cultivate a true community of practice without the willingness to share ideas. Interaction between members should be sustained over a period of time, allowing practitioners to develop shared cases of reference as touchstones for their continued development within their discipline.

Methods

I used data from my previous survey research (Broome, 2009a) to purposefully select an observation site with a multi-age program that had existed for over 15 years and also had low employment turnover for the teachers involved in this investigation. The observation site, a public school referred to as Minco Elementary, has not been used in my previous qualitative research (Broome, 2009b), and all proper names associated with the school have been assigned pseudonyms. The racial demographics of the student population of Minco Elementary were estimated to be 54% White, 27% African American, 8% multiracial, 6% Hispanic, and 5% Asian or Pacific Islanders (GreatSchools, 2013). Other than the Cooperation Crew, all other classrooms at Minco Elementary were organized by traditional grade levels. While my previous qualitative research on this subject only included observations and interviews with an art teacher, this new research project also examined qualitative data from multi-age homeroom teachers.

I conducted my fieldwork primarily as an observer rather than as a participant (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). I was never the instructor of the class, nor did I participate in class activities alongside students. I collected fieldnotes quietly in the back of various classrooms during seven visits to Minco Elementary that occurred over a three-month period. Although I was as unobtrusive as possible, I don't claim that students didn't ever notice me – potentially changing behaviors in minor ways. If students ever asked about my presence, the multi-age instructors merely stated that I was there to learn, that I was observing teachers (not students), and that they should behave as usual.

During the first three visits, I spent the entire school day observing the Cooperation Crew in their homeroom classes, and while accompanying them to art class. For the remaining visits, I observed partial days, often only in art class, and spent more time focused on conducting a series of qualitative interviews (Seidman, 2005). In all, I conducted two solo interviews with each of the multi-age homeroom teachers (Mrs. Barnes, Mrs. Kahan, and Mrs. Glenda), one group interview with all of the homeroom teachers, and three solo interviews with the art

teacher, who I refer to as Mrs. Paddy.

In analyzing the transcribed data, I first created a set of predetermined *codes* – or identifiable and meaningful phrases (Cera, 2013) - to be applied to my fieldnotes and interview transcripts. It was unavoidable that I already had some sense of prefigured foci (Eisner, 1998) in mind – such as *cooperative learning*, *flexible regrouping*, and *thematic instruction* – since I was already familiar with this topic from my previous research. I reviewed my fieldnotes and used a color coding system to identify passages where such prefigured foci were must applicable to the situations I had observed. Once this process was complete, I went through my fieldnotes a second time, switching to an open coding approach that attended to unexpected patterns that emerged from the data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). This process helped me to identify new understandings, or emergent foci (Eisner, 1998), related to multi-age instruction at Minco Elementary that I hadn't expected. I compiled the coded data onto qualitative data category cards (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014) organized by similar topics to help me inductively recognize overarching themes that allowed for qualitative conclusions (Eisner, 1998).

In presenting my findings, I adopt strategies used in narrative inquiry – a specific type of qualitative research (Clandinin & Huber, 2010) – to share the stories of the multi-age teachers at Minco Elementary. Some forms of narrative inquiry feature stories collected through interviews (Chase, 2005) and frequently embrace the use of expressive language to descriptively share such narrative accounts (Coulter & Smith, 2009). It is in this spirit of narrative inquiry that I present the stories of the teachers at Minco Elementary below. For organizational coherence, I have grouped each set of stories next to a relevant overarching research question that helped to guide this study.

The Stories

What were the Initial Experiences of the Homeroom Teachers and the Art Teacher in Implementing Multi-Age Structures, and what was the Nature of Congruency in these Experiences?

Rebellious Origins
"I never thought I'd be a rebel at fifty years of age."

Mrs. Barnes was explaining the origins of the Cooperation Crew. She had worked alongside Mrs. Kahan, and Mrs. Glenda for a number of years, but in separate kindergarten, first, and second grade classrooms, before forming a mixed-age class together. "We would always meet each other in the hall," said Mrs. Barnes, "and we'd talk about our frustrations with how we weren't doing the right thing for children."

It was the system, not the students, that frustrated the teachers. In their search for new instructional approaches, the teachers began to read research and attend workshops that introduced them to multi-age education. They traveled to other cities to observe working multi-age classrooms and attend related conferences. Initially, the idea of working together as a team appealed the most to the three colleagues. "If you are with people who believe the same thing," Mrs. Barnes said to me, "then you are going to get more done than if you are with people who don't believe the same thing." Eventually, the trio also became convinced that the formation of heterogeneous mixed-age groups from kindergarten to second grade best fit their educational philosophies and past experiences as grade level instructors. With support from school administrators, the Cooperation Crew was established and presented to parents as an add-on option along with the graded classrooms already entrenched at Minco Elementary School.

The Cooperation Crew teachers acknowledge that their ideas didn't find a receptive audience with their colleagues at first. "We talked with other teachers about starting multi-age classes, and they thought we were crazy!" explained Mrs. Barnes. "It probably took four years before they felt like the children in our classes were learning and that everything was ok." Over time, the program found greater acceptance among staff, administration, and parents, and both of the principal's children have been members of the Cooperation Crew. "Most of the kids are in our class because parents have requested it," explained Mrs. Barnes.

And as far as being the fifty-year old rebels at the school? "I wouldn't necessarily say that it made me feel good to be a rebel," says Mrs. Barnes. "But I feel like I'm doing what I should be doing."

Multi-age Art
"When it was first suggested that we would have a multi-age class in special areas [art, music, and physical education], I was concerned that I wouldn't be able to reach all of the children with a common art project." Mrs. Paddy, Minco Elementary's art teacher, was reflecting on how she first received the news about the formation of the Cooperation Crew. "But the more we talked about it, the more I decided it would be feasible. The homeroom teachers wanted to maintain that multi-age continuity throughout the whole school day, even in special areas. They suggested that I think of it as a combination class, and that helped. I'd taught combination classes before at community centers and at another school where we didn't have enough students to fill up a grade - so we had these split-grade classes. With that frame of reference, all of a sudden, it didn't sound so unusual to me."

"Was it important that the special area teachers were willing to allow multi-age groupings in their classrooms?" I asked.

"Extremely important!" said Mrs. Paddy emphatically. "It was important for us to give the homeroom teachers a chance to try it, and to give ourselves an opportunity to find out how it would work. There was a lot of communication with the Cooperation Crew teachers when things didn't go smoothly in the beginning. I learned how they talk to students, and how they use older children to help younger children. It made sense for me to take on some of that same persona in my own room, because that's what the children are used to hearing and reacting to."

"Can you imagine what it would have been like if the special area teachers had declined to participate?" I asked.

"I think it would have diluted the whole premise," replied Mrs. Paddy. "We would have missed out on a great opportunity. It also would have been confusing to the students, to suddenly split them into grade level groupings and send just the first graders to art, or the second graders to music, or whatever. It would have been so disruptive to the multi-age concept. Our decisions were made with concern for the children in mind, and not for ourselves and whether we could handle mixed-ages or not."

Discussion
The idea to create multi-age classes was initiated by the Cooperation Crew homeroom teachers; they actively researched the topic and attended workshops to help them in their preparation for mixed-age structures. Mrs. Paddy, however, did not initiate the organization of multi-age groups within her art room, but rather found the structure offered to her once the formation was already underway. Similar to other multi-age arts teachers that I had surveyed in the past (Broome, 2009a; Broomw, 2016), Mrs. Paddy had less autonomy and fewer opportunities in preparing for multi-age structures, and she expressed some initial reservations in her abilities to plan for a range of age levels within the same class. Some of these concerns were eased by the homeroom teachers' suggestion to relate multi-age instruction to her past experiences with combination classes. Making such comparisons to familiar touchstones may help special area teachers in reconceptualizing preparation for multi-age structures (Kasten & Clarke, 1993).

What Instructional Practices were Used by the Multi-Age Homeroom Teachers and the Art Teacher, and what was the Nature of Congruency in these Practices?

Cooperative Spirit
Students in Mrs. Glenda's room were standing in a circle, listening to a children's hip-hop song, and dancing along to the music. I noticed one girl, Tara, with a huge smile on her face as Mrs. Glenda gently helped her to stand and move to the music. Tara had cerebral palsy and Mrs. Glenda wanted her to feel like an equal participant in movement activities as well. As I

listened, I realized that the lyrics to the song centered on the phonetic pronunciation of various letter combinations. A student named Chris moved into the center of the circle and was demonstrating movements that accompanied the song. "Show them the dance again, Chris," encouraged Mrs. Glenda. "You know it really well." For that moment, Chris was modeling instruction for his classmates instead of his teacher. She couldn't. Mrs. Glenda still had her arms gently around Tara, helping her move to the dance too.

During my observations in the multi-age homerooms, I noted many instances when students would teach or assist peers during large table work. Student collaboration was most evident during learning center activities that featured predetermined groups working with manipulatives in subject area tasks (see Figure 4), or on Wednesdays when the Cooperation Crew had *Club Day*. For Club Day, students were presented with a variety of options for topic-related group activities that were organized by family members of Cooperation Crew students. During my observations, the club groupings available to the Cooperation Crew related to paper dolls, Asian cultures, music, cooking, construction, art, and gardening. Clubs were reorganized on a monthly basis, and were unique to the Cooperation Crew as the other teachers at Minco Elementary had not implemented such activities in their weekly schedules.

Figure 4. Group work during a learning center activity in the subject area of science.

Cooperation in Art
I noted a similar cooperative spirit when the Cooperation Crew attended art class, but that this

spirit sometimes manifested itself in subtler ways. Peer assistance and tutoring often happened spontaneously or as prompted by Mrs. Paddy's frequent encouragement: "Karen, I like the way that you helped others when they needed it. Can you help him a little bit; it looks like he could use a little help." The following passage from my fieldnotes is also representative of the types of interactions that I observed on a regular basis:

> *Mrs. Paddy called her table captains to pass out crumpled paper towels and small*
> *palates of paint. To add implied texture to their images, students were to dip the*
> *crumpled towels into the paint and gently press it onto the paper. As the students*
> *started to work, a girl turned to a smaller boy who seemed hesitant to begin. "We*
> *call this painting," she said as she directed his attention to her paper, ". . . actually*
> *dabbing."*
> *"Is this how we do it?" asked the boy. They both stretched over his artwork to take*
> *a look.*

On other occasions, I noted the supportive attitude that the Cooperation Crew students displayed toward each other's artwork. Table captains repeatedly complimented their classmates as they distributed projects from the previous week, sometimes giving everyone at their table high-fives and even proclaiming, "Great artists!" I was curious to know how Mrs. Paddy perceived the interactions of the Cooperation Crew students, and asked her about it during one of our interviews.

"The premise of multi-age grouping is that children are going to learn from one another," she told me. "The older children model the expected behavior, and it's a large part of the Cooperation Crew concept. For example, I recently saw Alexandria helping Charlie with a ceramic project; he was struggling to even make an egg shape. She taught him in an appropriate way, rather than doing it for him, and it was just wonderful to see. She was living the Cooperation Crew way!"

Discussion

Both the homeroom teachers and the art teacher incorporated cooperative learning strategies into their instructional repertoires to some extent, collectively embracing the encouragement of peer tutoring and peer assistance. The homeroom teachers' efforts in including collaborative assignments were most overt during learning center and Club Day activities when children were expected to work in groups. All in all, a cooperative spirit seemed to permeate all Cooperation Crew activities, even those that didn't involve group assignments. This cooperative attitude seemed to carry-over into Mrs. Paddy's art room and she encouraged peer assistance and suggestions, even if she was not as overt in arranging collaborative assignments during my observations and did not discuss large scale group work in our

interviews. Given the positive social and emotional results that other art educators have noted for students participating in collaborative art activities (Broome, 2014; Hurwitz, 1993; Hutzel, Russell, & Gross, 2010; Kelehear & Heid, 2002), multi-age art classrooms may present an ideal environment to pursue such activities further.

Thematic Instruction

I was also curious to know more about the importance of thematic instruction in guiding multi-age curricula. "Selecting a theme plays a big role," explained Mrs. Glenda during a group interview with all three homeroom teachers. "This year, we decided to study our home state of Florida as a social studies unit, and immediately found ways to connect that topic to language arts, the alphabet, and phonics too. We found a book called *S is for Sunshine* (Crane, 2000) that uses the alphabet to describe Florida; it became the focus for our year-long theme. Often, the books we read during our whole-group morning meetings will relate to our theme. I think you can teach anything with a good book. Of course, not every activity has to connect to the theme, but it gives us some direction."

"At first, we'd choose a theme and study it for about three months," explained Mrs. Kahan. "But now we are using year-long themes, which I like because the students can explore the topics in-depth. At the end of the year, I coordinate a class performance that relates to the theme as a culminating event. The challenge is that we have to choose a different theme every year, because we loop with students. We can repeat skill-based instruction, but themes can't repeat because we'll have the same kids for three years in-a-row."

"I think, though, that this really helps us to stay fresh as teachers," added Mrs. Glenda, "because we're not doing the same old thing every year. We're always learning something new too."

The Florida Highwaymen and Other Thematic Connections

During my fieldwork, I observed two art lessons that connected to the Floridian theme implemented by the Cooperation Crew. The first involved a watercolor resist project depicting birds native to Florida, and revolved around the paintings of John James Audubon during his travels to the state (Proby, 1974). The second lesson, which I actually watched Mrs. Paddy introduce, focused on the paintings of the Florida Highwaymen. Mrs. Paddy used selected images to tell the story of these African American artists who painted natural landscape scenes of Florida and sold their work door-to-door, or even on the side of the road, often out of the trunks of their cars (Enns, 2009). Mrs. Paddy introduced the names of particularly prolific Highwaymen (such as Robert Butler, Alfred Hair, and Harold Newton), and a colorful print by Butler served as a historical reference for students. While referring to the print, Mrs. Paddy introduced relevant vocabulary, such as *landscape*, *horizon line*, and

vertical lines.

For an accompanying studio project, students were to make their own Floridian landscape paintings. Mrs. Paddy demonstrated a variety of painting techniques, including the application of implied texture, and the mixing of colors that might be needed to paint beaches, grass, palm trees and sky (see Figures 5 and 6). She revisited the terms *horizontal* and *vertical* in discussing possible compositions that juxtapose standing palm trees against established horizon lines.
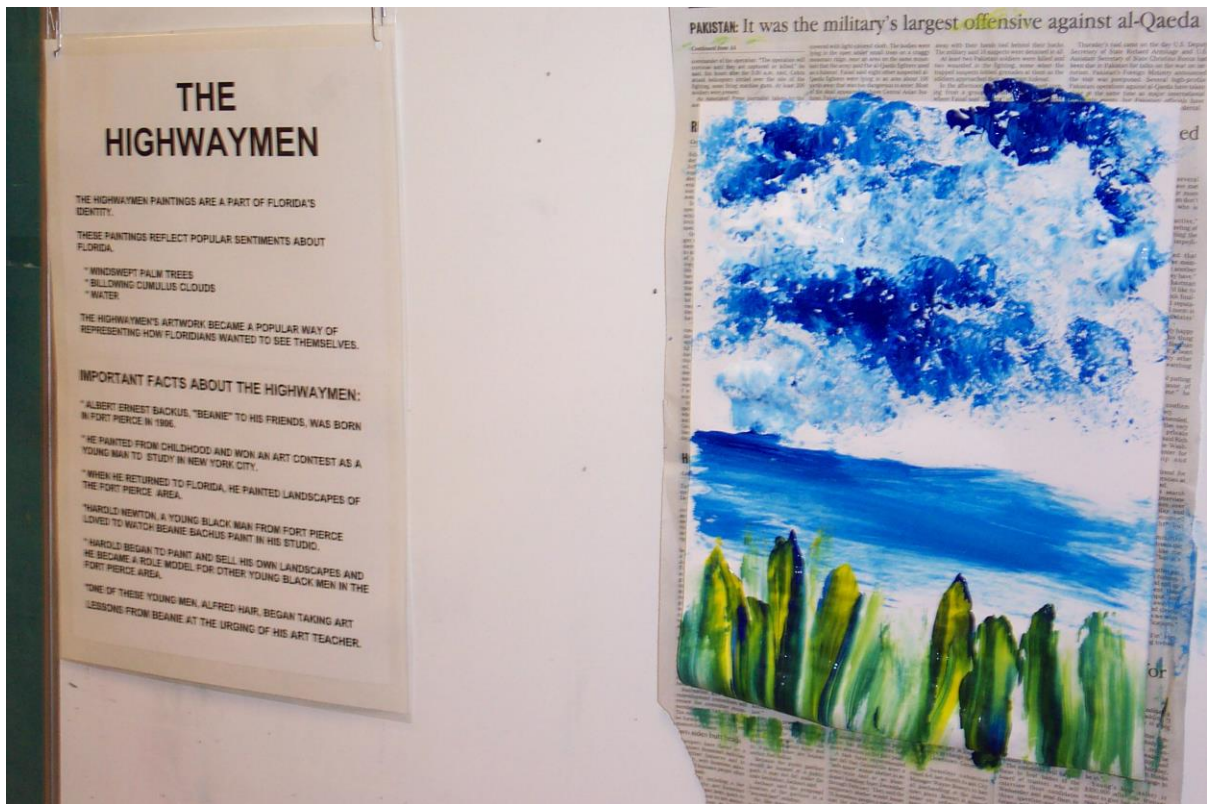

Figure 5. A sampling of Mrs. Paddy's display and demonstration for the Florida Highwaymen project.

Later, I asked Mrs. Paddy about her views on connecting classroom themes to art lessons. "I like to do it when it works in my own curriculum, as opposed to being an addendum to a different subject area," she told me. "I talk with teachers about potential lessons in art that might tie-in with their curriculum. Those conversations are really important, and connecting with classroom themes helps children because there is more continuity in learning. The Cooperation Crew plans a year-long theme in advance, so they can tell me ahead of time what they are going to teach, and I can begin thinking about possible connections. That makes it easier for me, and their themes usually fit well in the art room."

"But the Cooperation Crew teachers don't use the same theme every year," I responded.

"No. And I can't do the same thing every year either," pointed out Mrs. Paddy. "If I did, some Cooperation Crew students would end up with three Highwaymen paintings. But I can repeat certain skills and concepts, and just use a different project to teach those skills."

Figure 6. A sample for the Florida Highwaymen project.

Discussion

Both the homeroom teachers and the art teacher based their instruction around themes of interest for their students. Mrs. Paddy took time to learn the topics used in homerooms and –

when it fit well with her curriculum – integrated the topic into art instruction, believing that this integration helped deepen curricular connections and continuity. She identified potential connections to the Cooperation Crew's focused study on their home state of Florida and integrated this topic into art instruction twice during my observations: first in referencing Florida wildlife through the work of John James Audubon, and secondly, in the Florida Highwaymen project[1]. Both Mrs. Paddy and the homeroom teachers recognized that thematic centerpieces of instruction should not be repeated for a three-year cycle due to the established looping patterns (Ball, Grant, & Johnson, 2006; Ritland & Eighmy, 2013; Trani & Irvine, 2010) of the Cooperation Crew, but all acknowledged that certain skills were bound to be reintroduced from year to year.

It is worth briefly noting here that many of the instructional strategies used in multi-age classrooms – including cooperative learning, differentiation, and thematic instruction – can be beneficially implemented in graded classrooms (Hyry-Beihammer & Hascher, 2015; Ritland & Eighmy, 2013; Smit, Hyry-Beihammer, & Raggl, 2015) and art rooms as well. As I have discussed elsewhere (Broome, 2009a; Broome, 2014), it is the potential application of multi-age teaching strategies to all art classrooms – where sometimes these approaches may be sorely missing – that makes investigations into this topic potentially relevant to all art educators, whether they work in mixed-age contexts or not.

What Strategies Were Used by the Homeroom Teachers in Organizing Mixed-Age Groups for Subject Area and Art Instruction?

Flexible Groupings
During my observations with the Cooperation Crew's homeroom teachers, I witnessed numerous instances when students would make noticeable transitions from teacher to teacher for specific activities or subject area instruction: writing groups moved to math groups, math groups moved to reading groups, and so on and so forth. During these transitions, students would move from classroom to classroom in a variety of directions, but everyone seemed to know exactly where to go. In a later interview with the homeroom teachers, I tried to sort out all of the movement.

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[1] In my fieldnotes, I also included several lengthy reflective passages that were critical of the Florida Highwaymen lesson for its traditional focus on landscape painting and studio-related vocabulary. I found that this traditional approach ignored ripe opportunities for questioning social justice concerns related to the context of the Highwaymen's careers and lives. For example, what socio-economic and political issues might have influenced the need for these artists to sell their work along the side of the road or door-to-door? Although I stand by these criticisms, I chose to omit such a lengthy discussion from this article as it seemed beyond the pragmatic – rather than socially reconstructive – scope and intentions of this study.

"We do a lot of pre-assessment at the beginning of the year, to determine each student's reading and math skills," said Mrs. Kahan. She explained how there are portions of the day when students are grouped primarily by developmental level for the instruction of specific subject area skills. These developmental groupings still allowed for peer assistance, but differed in nature from the purposeful mixing of heterogeneous levels that I had observed during learning center activities and Club Day.

As the school year progressed, the teachers occasionally reorganized skill level groups to meet students' changing needs. "If we have a child that is really excelling or struggling in an area that we didn't expect, we make a switch," explained Mrs. Barnes. Remembering that it was this flexible movement of students from one grouping to another that led to inconsistent art rosters for many participants in my past survey research (Broome, 2009a), I wondered how such regrouping impacted art classes at Minco Elementary. "We switch back to homeroom groups before going to art and other special area classes," said Mrs. Barnes. "The homeroom groups are multi-aged, but remain consistent."

Discussion
The Cooperation Crew homeroom teachers used a variety of flexible grouping strategies (Alessi, Hoyne, & Stewart, 2006; Ritland & Eighmy, 2013) to rearrange their students from teacher to teacher and by subject area to differentiate instruction based on learning profiles, and readiness and interest levels (Hyry-Beihammer & Hascher, 2015; Ritland & Eighmy, 2013). In spite of this constant interchange of students, the Cooperation Crew teachers took time to revert back to consistent multi-age homeroom groupings before sending their students to art or other special areas. This organizational practice provided Mrs. Paddy with consistent groupings in art and, unlike many of the respondents to my earlier survey research (Broome, 2009a), she did not face the frustration of regrouped art rosters that could change in the middle of ongoing projects. While this solution may seem obvious, those who deal with the complexities of school schedules (Canady & Rettig, 2008) are likely to realize that any number of factors – including the duration of other special area classes or the opportunity to assign common planning time to multi-age homeroom teams – could potentially turn this simple panacea into a rescheduling task of significant proportions. Nonetheless, the solution offered by the Cooperation Crew homeroom teachers does present an interesting lead for others who deal with multi-age scheduling or are experiencing inconsistent special area rosters as the result of flexible regrouping practices.

Emergent Findings

The stories above help to characterize the congruency of multi-age approaches for both the homeroom teachers and the art teacher at the purposefully selected school site used for this investigation. During analysis, however, an abundance of coded data emerged that did more

than describe the practices of these teachers, but rather explained why these practices worked particularly well in this context. These emergent themes – related to an ethic of caring (Noddings, 1988) and communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) – are discussed in greater detail below.

Ethic of Caring

As the primary instrument for analyzing qualitative data (Eisner, 1998), I found that the multi-age teachers at Minco Elementary personified many of the quintessential elements of an ethic of caring, including (a) the modeling of caring behaviors, (b) the promotion of open dialogue, (c) the provision of collaborative work, and (d) the confirmation of the best attributes of students as nurtured through long-term student-teacher relationships (Noddings, 1988). Since I have already illustrated above the ways in which the multi-age teachers had utilized collaborative work and cultivated longer student-teacher relationships[2], I will not dwell on those topics further here. Instead I will turn my attention to the aspects of an ethic of caring that I have not yet addressed: the teachers' use of open dialogue and modeling of caring behavior.

Specifically, the importance of inter-collegial dialogue emerged as an overlapping behavior that helped to facilitate success with thematic integration, cooperative learning, and also during preparation for multi-age classes. The data indicated that communication was reciprocal between all participants and that each teacher played a role in initiating conversations about multi-age implementation. In the case of thematic instruction, Mrs. Paddy often initiated such dialogue by inquiring about homeroom themes that might connect with the art curriculum. However, the Cooperation Crew teachers also played a role in this process by communicating their year-long topic in advance, giving Mrs. Paddy time to search for appropriate connections. As for Mrs. Paddy's use of cooperative learning strategies, she spoke frequently with the homeroom teachers in order to gain an understanding of "how they talk to students, and how they use older children to help younger children." Such conversations gave Mrs. Paddy a basic understanding of the tenets of multi-age education and a blueprint to follow in encouraging peer assistance in her own classroom.

Open dialogue seemed essential during the beginning stages of Mrs. Paddy's acclimation to multi-age education; she was receptive to the suggestions of others and willing "to give the

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[2] In relationship to an ethic of caring, it is significant to note that Noddings (1988) supports the practice of looping, specifically stating that "there is no good reason why teachers should not stay with one group of students for three years rather than one in the elementary years" (p. 225) as a way to establish continuity in a caring classroom environment.

homeroom teachers a chance to try it, and to give [herself] an opportunity to find out how it would work." Mrs. Paddy's attitude is significant, as she entered into these conversations without inflexible and steadfast negative conclusions drawn in advance (Noddings, 1988). The reluctance of stakeholders to accept change from traditional educational structures presents a frequent obstacle in the implementation of multi-age education (Ball, 2006) and was an obstacle revealed in locating participants for my earlier survey research on this subject (Broome, 2009a). In those cases – when special area teachers would not allow mixed-age groupings in their classes – homeroom teachers were forced to revert back to grade level groupings and labels for special area classes, even though the use of such divisions might undermine the community spirit espoused by multi-age philosophies (Aina, 2001; Coyne, 2000).

Overall, emerging patterns within the qualitative data suggest that the dialogue between the art teacher and the homeroom teachers positively influenced the congruency of their practices. In a sense, the communication that occurred between these teachers modeled the exact type of collaboration and cooperation that they expected from their students. For Noddings (1988), the provision of such examples of thoughtful interaction is an essential quality to establishing an ethic of caring. She maintains that it is just as important to model "not only admirable patterns of intellectual activity but also desirable ways of interacting with people" (p. 223).

Community of Practice

Through my lens of interpretation, the relationships between the multi-age teachers at Minco Elementary also embodied many of the essential characteristics of successful communities of practice. That is to say that the teachers actively pursued a common domain of interest as a joint enterprise, they openly learned from one another through mutual engagement, and they spent sustained time together sharing their professional repertoires as dedicated practitioners (Wenger, 1998; Wenger & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). For the multi-age homeroom teachers, this shared pursuit of a domain-specific concern was particularly pronounced and represented in their impetus for forming a mixed-age class. Mrs. Barnes explained how decisions were made based on "doing the right thing for the children" and "doing what [we] should be doing [for students]", rather than in reaction to test scores, declining enrollment, or administrative pressure. These 50-year-old rebels followed their own educational sensibilities in seeking training, and eventually selected and implemented a suitable classroom environment that matched their pedagogical orientation toward student-centered approaches that fostered collaboration and developmentally appropriate instruction. Like many other successful communities of practice, the Cooperation Crew has benefited from sustained relationships (Wenger & Wenger-Trayner, 2015) and has enjoyed increased support from parents and administration over the course of its 15 years of existence.

While the Cooperation Crew homeroom teachers formed a community of practice from their shared interest in alternative models of school organization, Mrs. Paddy initially joined for more practical reasons. Like other multi-age arts teachers that I have surveyed (Broome, 2009a; Broome, 2016), Mrs. Paddy had little autonomy in the decision to implement multi-age structures at Minco Elementary. As such, her entrée into this specific community of practice is better characterized by such activities as *problem solving*, *requests for information*, *seeking experience*, and *visits* (Wenger & Wenger-Trayner, 2015) to the homeroom teachers to learn more about the multi-age approach. For all art educators, it is significant to acknowledge Mrs. Paddy's proactive nature in establishing such relationships with her colleagues in other subject areas, as many teachers of the arts report an overall feeling of isolation or lack of support at their school sites (Barrett, 2006; Chapman, 2005b). For all teachers working with mixed-age classrooms, the emerging findings of this research project also point to the potential benefits in seeking and forming communities of multi-age practice and adopting an ethic of caring in that process.

Epilogue

In my last interview with Mrs. Paddy, we explored what it meant to her to be an art teacher working in coordination with a multi-age class. "I really like teaching the Cooperation Crew," Mrs. Paddy explained. "I look forward to seeing them in class. I like the results, the way we interact, and I like working with their teachers. They - just like their students - are kind, flexible, creative, and highly professional. They are what I think good teachers should be. There's a certain cohesiveness to their philosophy that makes the relationships in those classrooms tighter."

I reflected for a moment about my observations in Mrs. Paddy's room, and then asked an unplanned and unscripted question. I received the quickest response that I had encountered during all of my observations. It was the kind of quick response that comes when asking someone their own name.

"Do you feel like a member of the Cooperation Crew?"

"Yes. Yes, I do."

While I collected numerous pages of fieldnotes at Minco Elementary, the selected instances described above are representative of my overall experiences. Through my lens as the primary instrument for interpreting qualitative data (Eisner, 1998), the observations revealed a case with relative congruency between the organizational and instructional practices of the multi-age homeroom teachers and the art teacher at the selected observation site. Throughout my observations, the use of thematic instruction and cooperative learning seemed to resonate

similarly well in both general classrooms and the art room. I left Minco Elementary with the feeling that I had observed a multi-age community of practice in action, and that it was the teachers' commitment to an ethic of care that made the various elements of the Cooperation Crew work successfully. In many ways, the teachers embodied the types of cooperative and caring communication that they expected of their own students.

Throughout the last decade, the use of mixed-age configurations in schooling appeared to be increasing throughout the world (Nishida, 2009), with approximately one-third of all classrooms already combining grade levels for one purpose or another (Cornish, 2006). As such, mixed-grade teaching situations appear to be "gaining new importance in the context of future plans for small schools, alternative scholastic education, and reforms of educational systems" (Hyry-Beihammer & Hascher, 2015, p. 107). Due to the scant resources available to art educators and other special area teachers working with mixed-age classrooms, additional research on multi-age arts instruction is needed. Such research could be useful not only to art teachers working at multi-age school sites, but also to art educators who may benefit from rich descriptions of student-centered socio-constructive teaching strategies that may be effective in graded contexts as well.

Since this article explores the working relationship between homeroom teachers and an art teacher at one specially selected multi-age school site, I am not claiming that these results pertain to all other multi-age schools. However, I am hopeful that this case offers suggestions to multi-age homeroom and special area teachers for framing their organizational and instructional practices in ways that are mutually advantageous. At times these suggestions relate to broader issues of interaction, planning, and forming caring communities of practice. At other times, the suggestions relate to issues of organizational practicality, such as the reversion to consistent mixed-age homeroom groupings prior to attending special area classes. In either case, the intent in sharing the experiences of these teachers in their unique educational situation is to add to the collective strategies that may be used by others in similar circumstances (Biesta & Burbules, 2003).

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