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A STUDY OF THE NONGRADED ELEMENTARY SCHOOL WITH A
PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO THE EXPERIENCE AT OLD BONHOMME
SCHOOL DISTRICT OF LADUE ST. LOUIS COUNTY, MISSOURI
(TITLE)

BY

Harriet B. Walker

PLAN B PAPER

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
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I HEREBY RECOMMEND THIS PLAN B PAPER BE ACCEPTED AS
FULFILLING THIS PART OF THE DEGREE, M.S. IN ED.

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Most elementary schools of today classify children by grades. The achievement expectancy of each grade is regarded as a year of work. For purposes of administration and instruction, the elementary school is organized into grades grouped for administrative purposes into combinations of six, seven or eight grades of equal length.

According to most state laws, children enter the first grade at approximately six years of age. Prior to this age, children may or may not have completed a year of kindergarten. The developmental reading program sets objectives or goals of attainment to be evaluated at the conclusion of each grade or combination of grades. Many children reach or exceed these attainment levels. In the case of the child who fails to reach the standards set for the grade, parents are frequently at a loss to understand why the child is achieving below standard. The failure of many children to accomplish the goals set for them often results in loss of interest for the child and bewilderment for the teacher.

The realities of child development defy the rigorous ordering of children's abilities and attainments into conventional graded structure.¹ For example, in the average first grade there is a

¹John I. Goodlad and Robert H. Anderson, The Nongraded Elementary School (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1959), p. 3.

spread of four years in pupil readiness to learn as suggested by mental age data.² As pupils progress through the grades, this span of readiness widens.³ A child does not progress at the same rate; the child tends to spurt ahead more rapidly in some areas than others. Consequently, if there is a difference of one grade between the child's reading attainment and the arithmetic attainment at the end of the second grade, this difference may widen to one of three or four grades by the end of the fifth year in school.⁴ In spite of the fact a teacher is assigned to teach a fourth grade class, the pupils in part, are not properly working on the achievement level of a fourth grade group. The spread of achievement represented in a class may extend from grade two through eight or a spread of five or six grades.

Graded structure has been typical in school organization for a long time and represents a tradition which resists change. The problem of individual differences in pupil achievement has engaged the active concern of school personnel for centuries. The more recent emphasis upon the needs of the individual child has resulted in bringing the nature of instruction provided and the learner level into closer harmony. The search for ways and means to better solutions for the problems caring for individual differences is a continuing challenge to all who are working to help children to learn. The nongraded elementary

²Ibid., p. 3.

³Ibid., p. 3.

⁴Ibid., p. 14.

school is under experimentation at the present time to determine what contribution it can make to more effective learning in elementary schools.

CHAPTER II

THE NONGRADED ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

A. Historical Background

Our schools were not always graded. The "district" schools of the eighteenth century and the dame schools of the seventeenth century were without grade classifications. In the former, children attended only when teacher and school moved into their district¹ picking up after a long time lapse where they had left off in their studies. In the dame school, children as young as three, associated with children as old as ten, each child receiving twenty minutes or so of individualized instruction perhaps twice daily. Since all teaching was on a definitely individual basis, children spent the balance of their time listening to others recite, talking and whispering, or getting into mischief.²

These early institutions of learning must have been dreary and boring. It is interesting to note that instruction was highly individualized. Groups were usually small. Eight or nine youngsters made up an entire class and, thus, the school. The teachers were

¹For a description of a school's itinerary, see Sarah L. Bailey, Historical Sketches of Andover (Boston, Houghton Mifflin Co., 1880), p. 318.

²For further description, see William H. Small, Early New England Schools (Boston, Ginn and Co., 1914), pp. 178-179.

poorly prepared. The curriculum consisted of whatever reading and ciphering they were able to teach. Attendance was irregular. The teacher and child began at the point where learning and instruction were last interrupted. There were no principals, no supervisors, no courses of study as known today, no graded series of texts, and no grades. All these were yet to come.

Movements toward grading were clearly in evidence during the eighteenth century.³ In the eighteenth century, the selectmen of Boston developed separate reading and writing schools. Boys attended one and girls the other, changing at midday. New buildings provided reading schools on the upper floor and writing schools on the lower. A certain ordering of instruction began to appear: arithmetic was to be learned at the age of eleven; ten lines were to be written from copy books in a single session, and ciphering done every other day.⁴ Certain accomplishments were believed to be appropriate for specific levels.⁵ In fact, grade "norms" were being introduced.

By 1860, the graded system had been widely adopted, especially

³Ellwood P. Cubberly, Readings in the History of Education (Cambridge, The Riverside Press, 1920), pp. 543-544.

⁴Ibid., p. 544.

⁵Lowry W. Harding, "Influence of Commissions, Committees, and Organizations Upon the Development of Elementary Education," The American Elementary School, Harold G. Shane, ed. (New York, Harper and Brothers, 1953), p. 160.

in the cities,⁶ and, by 1870, in the words of Shearer, "the pendulum had swung from no system to nothing but system."⁷

In the present twentieth century, practice in school organization must be viewed against four sweeping movements of widespread influence.⁸

First, educational objectives were viewed in broad perspective: concern for children's health, personality, and social adjustment was added to the long-established intellectual and moral aspects of education. Instruction designed to educate young people to promote a better social order, with social problems as its subject matter and problem-solving as its method, was not readily adaptable to patterned grades and content.

Second, attention was given to human development.

Third, research into child development was paralleled by research into the effects of many school practices.

Fourth, learning theory suggested that improvements could be made on the classic view that subject matter be organized for its own preservation and for uncovering new knowledge.

These four developments do not point to the worthiness of one administrative structure; but it does raise a question of the effectiveness

⁶Freeman Butts and Lawrence A. Cremin, A History of Education in American Culture (New York, Henry Holt and Co., 1953), p. 275.

⁷William J. Shearer, The Grading of Schools (New York, A. P. Smith Publishing Co., 1899), p. 21.

⁸John I. Goodlad and Robert H. Anderson, The Nongraded Elementary School, New York, Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1959), p. 51-52.

of a structure that encourages considerations of problems along grade lines, imposes uniform standards, allows non-promotion practices, and compartmentalizes content. Goodlad and Anderson say "that the nongraded structure may have its disadvantages but, screened through the educational movements of the time, it comes out amazingly well."⁹

⁹Ibid., p. 52.

B. Identification and Description of a Nongraded School

The nongraded school is essentially a plan of school organization. It disregards grade-level designations. This plan places children in flexible groups. It allows each child to progress at his own rate. Some educators believe that the object of the nongraded school is to make possible a broader scope of education by providing a framework within which to "cultivate the higher mental processes, develop the unique potentialities of the individual, [and] stimulate creative inquiry."¹ Many educators feel it has much value for mental health practices.

In practice, the ungraded primary unit can be described in this manner.² Children beyond the kindergarten age but below fourth grade are grouped together into classes without designation according to "grades." The word Primary may appear at the door of a classroom where a teacher works with a group of pupils. Also a pupil record may indicate

¹John I. Goodlad, The Encyclopedia of Educational Research (New York, The Macmillan Co., 1960), p. 222.

²Albert Brinkman, "Now It's the Ungraded School," The P.T.A., LV (J., 1961), pp. 24-26.

the child is a member of the primary division. A child remains in a group two or three years. The child masters skills, gains understanding, appreciation, and attitudes at his own rate before moving on to the next level of tasks. In some instances the same teacher teaches the group over a two or three year period. An advantage claimed for this practice is the fact that the teacher avoids the waste of time and needless repetition in passing through the period of becoming acquainted with the pupil, his level of achievement and his learning problems. The child and the teacher can work best and accomplish the most when tensions and a sympathetic understanding of problems is at work.

Brinkman believes such a plan should be "based on sound research which does show wide differences in children -- differences in potentials, achievement, personality, motivation and rates of growth -- differences that defy the efforts of teachers to apply grade standards to any group of children at a given time."³ Flexible grouping may allow the child to progress in accordance with his potential, assets, and rate of growth. The child may be grouped within his class according to his achievement in a subject, his interest in a problem, or his need for a skill. He may work individually and somewhat independently on occasion for a considerable part of the school day. Reading lends to this type of planning.

Though the plan is a way of putting into practice the values,

³Ibid., p. 24.

progress and success for the individual child, "it is not an attempt to sell the public on an easy school."⁴ This plan does not ignore the essential place of challenging solid work. Goodlad and Anderson take the position that the school they advocate, though adapted to the needs and tempo of the children, must provide for trial and error since each pupil needs the opportunity "to encounter failure at a little more than the price he would pay for success."⁵ These authors add "that failure at something the child might achieve under different circumstances, rather than at something impossible for him may serve as a healthy stimulant."⁶ This failure may lead the child to a realistic idea of himself and an improved attitude toward work.

What ever term that a school system uses to refer to the organizational plan either primary unit, nongraded primary school, continuous progress plan, or primary cycle, all plans seem to have the following basic features:⁷

1. Each child is valued as a person in his own right.
2. Grade names and all they stand for are eliminated.
3. The child learns at his own rate through continuous progress and the attempt to offer him appropriate sequences.
4. Elimination or lessening the chances of possible failure.
5. The understanding and support of both teachers and parents is required.

⁴Ibid., p. 26.

⁵John I. Goodlad and Robert H. Anderson, The Nongraded Elementary School (New York, Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1962), p. 158.

⁶Ibid., p. 158.

⁷Ibid., pp. 159-160.

CHAPTER III

THE NONGRADED SCHOOL IN ACTION

A. Organization

When the decision has been made to adopt a school system committing the nongraded plan, one of the important problems to face is the provisions for grouping the children. Most nongraded programs do not follow a uniform pattern with respect to grouping practices. It is clear that progress in reading is one of the major bases in making most decisions about grouping.¹ In a number of "ungraded primary" plans, the children are grouped according to reading achievement levels, usually for the purpose of reducing the range of abilities with which the teacher must cope in language arts instruction. It is assumed that reading achievement is approximately correlated with achievement in other curriculum areas, and that some degree of homogeneity is obtained by using reading as a yardstick when assigning children to classes.² This seems to imply that some groups will include children who are considerably older or younger than the average child in the group. Older children whose pace is slower than "normal"

¹ John I. Goodlad and Robert H. Anderson, The Nongraded Elementary School (New York, Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1959), p. 64.

² Ibid., p. 65.

may experience some repetition of subject matter in other curriculum areas when they are transferred to a younger group whose reading level corresponds to theirs. This seems to depend upon the extent to which teachers are able to individualize the instructional program in all content areas. Proponents of this form of grouping argue that children's overall needs are better served when teachers deal with a limited range of problems in the skill generally regarded as the most important of all the child learns in his early school years, namely reading.³

This argument is rejected by some.⁴ They feel that a wide-spread of reading abilities and reading problems within the same class is not necessarily as problematical as the implications of homogeneous grouping. Many schools assign children to class groups on a random or chance basis. This is within age classification roughly comparable with those of graded schools. Others will group children on the basis of more carefully delimited age classification, for example, a group of fifty first year primary children might be divided into two class groups with those over six years six months in one class and those under six years six months in another. Still another approach is to make up class groups on a somewhat rough social-unity basis. Children whose interests, personalities, and whose backgrounds are quite similar are combined into one class.

³Ibid., p. 65.

⁴Ibid., p. 65.

B. Description of A Pioneer Study in Nongraded Practices

A description of the efforts of one nongraded school to achieve groupings of children is presented by Rosella Roff, referring to practices in the McMicken Heights School in the Seattle area.¹ In this case each group is planned so that there is a full range of reading levels, a full range of personality problems, balance of boys and girls and a recognition of the efforts of friendships and other peer relations. Also an effort is made to alternate children between men and women teachers above the primary level.

In this school there is a "divided reading program," which calls for half the class to report at nine o'clock and engage in one hour of skill teaching in reading until ten o'clock when the other half of the class arrives. In the afternoon, the first group leaves an hour earlier than the others, and the remaining hour is used for reading skills by the second group. It is argued that this system allows for the provision of individual attention in a relaxed atmosphere.²

¹Rosella Roff, "Grouping and Individualizing the Elementary Classroom," Educational Leadership, 15 (Dec., 1957), pp. 171-175.

²Ibid., p. 175.

C. Review of a Pilot Study in Burlington, Vermont

In the ungraded primary, learning is so paced that the child may experience success at every step of the way. Slow learners are not pushed into learning to read before they are ready. Gifted children spend as little time as possible on the extremely simple reading matter at the pre-primer and primer levels. They can be given a good deal of enrichment material.

In truth, the aim of the ungraded primary is to insure that provisions are made to meet individual differences.

Although teachers and administrators, who are working in ungraded primaries, feel that the children benefit greatly from the program, few objective evaluations have been made and the findings made available to teachers in published form. A report of the experience of a school system with the ungraded primary will be read eagerly by teachers in lower grades.¹

For several years one public elementary school in Burlington,

¹Celia Stendler, "Grouping Practices, Those First School Years," National Elementary School Principal, Vol. XL, No. 1, Sept., 1960, pp. 158-161.

Vermont has had an ungraded primary program in reading. Instruction in other subjects has been carried on under the traditional plan.

At the beginning of the study, the Standard Achievement Test, Primary Battery, was administered to all pupils regularly enrolled in the second and third grades in this school. It goes without saying that in reading level not all pupils were achieving at or above norm for the grade. The children's achievement in reading was compared with achievement in arithmetic.

The study emphasized the difference in achievement in two situations: the first, when ample provisions were made for individual differences, the second, when virtually no such provisions were made. For this reason, it was decided to limit the comparison to the modal-age children, thus eliminating the children for whom provisions for individual differences were made in arithmetic through repeating or skipping a grade.

The Detroit Group Intelligence Test was administered to the children in grades two and three. The average I.Q. of 116 was noted for both groups. If the children were achieving in accordance with their ability, the average achievement should have been well above their grade placement. Such was the case in reading, in which children of every ability level were presumably receiving instruction at an appropriate level of difficulty.

The grade placement of the children at the time of testing was 2.5 (i.e. at the fifth month of the second grade for pupils in second grade) and 3.5 for the pupils in third grade. In reading, the

achievement for all second grade pupils was 3.2 and 4.7 for the pupils in the third grade. The achievement for the modal age second grade pupils was exactly the same as for all pupils in second grade, namely, 3.2. The achievement for the modal age pupils in third grade was 4.8.

In arithmetic, all children, regardless of ability, were being given instruction at the level of their grade identity. The achievement of the children with this method of teaching was lower; 2.5 for the modal age children in second grade, 3.3 for the modal age third grade pupils. Scores for all pupils in the second and third grade were very close to the modal age groups. The spread of the arithmetic scores was much narrower than the spread of the reading achievement scores.

Reading Scores

Test scores also revealed that, in reading, the third grade pupils were achieving at a point further above their grade placement than the second grade pupils who had spent one year less in the ungraded situation. This result is understandable, since nearly all the children started at the same point at the beginning of the first year in a primary unit.

Guilford's formula for the standard error of a difference in correlated data was used to find whether the differences between reading and arithmetic achievement at each grade level were statistically significant. The data proved both were found to be very significant, the t ratio being 5.4 for pupils in the second grade and 7.5 for the pupils in the third grade.

A second comparison was made to determine whether the difference

in achievement in the two subjects might have been due in part to the fact that learning of reading is very different from the learning of arithmetic. The same tests given in the ungraded primary school were administered to all pupils in the second grade and third grade in two other elementary schools in the same city. The average intelligence of the pupils and their socio-economic backgrounds, the training and experience of their teachers, and the amount of time devoted to reading instruction in all three schools were comparable.

Since there was grouping on an ability basis within each grade in the two schools with traditional primaries, this second comparison was of two methods of providing for individual differences. The result showed that the children in the ungraded primary were reading at a higher level than the children in the traditional primaries.

While the study revealed that the children, on the average, were benefiting from an ungraded reading program, the question remained whether the children of all ability levels were benefiting. To answer this question, the children were arbitrarily divided into three groups on the basis of intelligence quotient according to the Detroit Group Intelligence Test: average, ranging from 88-112; superior ranging from 113-124; very superior, 125 and higher.

A comparison of reading and arithmetic achievement of children in their third year of ungraded reading instruction revealed that children of each ability level were doing considerably better in reading than in arithmetic. The difference was greatest for the very superior children.

In arithmetic these children were achieving 3.8, exactly at the point at which instruction was being given. Reading achievement was found to be at the 5.8 grade level.

When a comparison at the three ability levels was made with two schools following the traditional graded program, again the ungraded primary children showed a higher level of reading achievement, and again, the difference was greatest for children of very superior intelligence.

The ungraded primary then, benefits all children. Gifted children are not allowed to under achieve, nor are slow learners frustrated by repeated failure. All children progress from level to level, each child at his own rate.

D. Report on the Old Bonhomme School, Ladue District St. Louis County, Missouri

During the year, 1963-64, an experiment on the ungraded school has been conducted in Old Bonhomme School in the District of Ladue in St. Louis County, Missouri. Although this experiment is in the initial stage, certain observations can be made. The experiment is under the direction of Mrs. Margaret Hall, Coordinator of Primary grades in this school system. The description to follow is reported from a conference held with her at the conclusion of one year of operation under the plan as herewith described.¹

Until the nongraded primary plan was inaugurated in September, 1963, Old Bonhomme School was a traditionally graded school. The principal had long wanted to initiate a program of nongraded classification of students. He had hesitated because of the large sized enrollment of the school. When it was possible to have double sections of the first grade instead of the usual triple sections, the decision to try the program was made. A teacher was relieved of teaching duties as a coordinator.

The preparation and planning of the program is under continuing

¹Conference with Mrs. Margaret Hall, Coordinator of Primary grades, Old Bonhomme School, District of Ladue in St. Louis County, Missouri. Conference was held on July 18, 1964.

evaluation and modification. A planning period extended over a period of about eight and one-half months. The other primary teachers worked with her for about four months. This planning included visitation of schools, talking with principals and teachers, talking with parents, reading and research.

In order to acquaint the parents with details of the plan, parent meetings were held at the school in the evenings with the principal and coordinator in charge. The grade level meetings were held separately. There was almost total acceptance to the idea. At the first grade parent meeting very few questions were asked. At the second grade level, the parents asked more questions. At the third grade level still more questions were asked. The co-operation of parents was everything that was expected. In the main, the question at the third grade was, "What will happen at fourth grade?"

The program was described to the parents in September, 1963. The principal reported the decision had been made to put the change into effect and the coordinator explained how the plan would work, why it was being started, and gave some history of such a plan.

At the end of the first reporting period, nine weeks after school started in the fall 1963, a conference with each parent was held to report on the progress of his child. In subsequent grading periods, regular report cards were mailed to the home and the reading level was indicated. This was typed on the report card. The card indicated year in school and the reading level of the child.

There were many other reporting conferences as the reading teacher felt the need. These conferences might be with the parent and reading teacher or with both reading and room teacher. If necessary, the coordinator was included. The size of the primary department persists as the major problem of the program. The middle and top groups are too large. There is a need for another teacher who is not responsible for an administrative group. In the school year 1964-65, a teacher to fill this need is employed for one-half day.

The children have responded favorably to the demands of the new organization. Parents have said they wish their other children could have had a program of this type.

Unquestionably the children are working in a more relaxed classroom atmosphere. They are not required to compete with more capable students since they work with those whose ability compares more favorably with their own. Even though the work period is longer, the teachers have reported that the children appear to be under less pressure. Motivational procedures are more effective. There is time for more interesting activities. There is time to allow for greater coordination of language, spelling, reading skills, literature, and library reading. Teachers undoubtedly are harder at work and are planning more adequately with one another.

Groupings were designed after careful consideration by the teachers. Tests were used; but teacher evaluation was found to be more reliable than the test scores. The amount of testing throughout

the year varied with the different groups and with the individual. All data cards show test results.

A few kindergarten children have been affected by this program. Mrs. Hall helped with the kindergarten reading readiness program. Three children read with the first grade. The kindergarten became regarded as a part of the primary department in contrast to the separateness often true of the traditional program. The coordinator indicated there was mostly a crossing of content lines. However, in the few isolated cases crossing grade lines proved successful. In all probability more of this will be attempted gradually.

The different grade level classroom teachers were in conference with Mrs. Hall once a week. There were many individual conferences with the teachers as the need arose. This was a check on the progress and problems. The teachers expressed a desire for more visitation.

Extention of the nongraded program into the middle grades is already planned to take effect soon. The intermediate teachers will need to work closely with primary teachers to coordinate the reading program from kindergarten through sixth grade.

Some of the advantages inherent in this plan that are already discernable and which are not to be found in a graded situation are listed below:

1. The teacher can devote planning time to one level rather than to three or four reading groups. She does not have to plan "seat" exercises to serve the purpose of groups waiting a turn to read. She

does not have interruptions from children who are unable to work by themselves for such a long period of time. She knows more about each child. She can more accurately identify weaknesses and strengths. She has more accurate information to report to parents and does not have to speak in generalities. She has more definite information to report. Reports from two and sometimes three teachers may yield more reliable and complete information to parents. Conference and report cards can contain information from the room teacher, the reading teacher and the coordinator.

2. Rapport in the department seems to be improved. Teachers plan more closely together, help each other with problems, and work more efficiently as a closely integrated working body. Teachers show evidence of liking to talk over plans with the coordinator, who is also a teacher. They know she has problems in common and will be sympathetic to their problems. Obviously, some teachers will adjust more readily than others. Perhaps, in this circumstance an element of luck contributed to banding a group of teachers together who were willing to try something new rather than talk about it in general terms. This plan has seemed invaluable as a co-operative endeavor. Instead of gaining the experience at one grade level in a single year, the teacher has gained experience in a reading program from kindergarten through third grade.

3. Children seem to be more relaxed. They are relieved of the need to compete with more able students.

4. The program encourages teachers to want to extend the ungraded program into other subject areas. They gain confidence and develop the wish to experiment.

5. Teachers have more time to plan for other subjects since their reading plan is for only one level.

CHAPTER IV

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

For the most part, the success of the nongraded plan depends upon teachers accepting and understanding it. There are three major organizational advantages over the traditional graded school.

The nongraded school provides a single unbroken learning schedule for the pupil. The usual practice of dividing the school year into several parts of equal length, each with its own content and requirements is avoided.

The nongraded school makes possible a continuous individual progress. More able students work at their own rates and the slower students do not struggle to work beyond their capabilities.

The nongraded school encourages flexibility in pupil grouping. Each student is placed in a setting best suited for his abilities, attainments, and maturity. The student is moved when it is safely assumed that another learning association is better suited for his needs and abilities.

Learners with different capacities and attainments proceed at varying rates of speed, each at their own rate in achieving learner success. Learning now becomes a developmental process as each child proceeds irregularly, but not according to quantitative limitations imposed by the graded structure.

The nongraded school provides optimum setting for sequential learning and pupil progress.

An earlier report in this study revealed the Burlington, Vermont experiment favored the nongraded school.¹ The McMicken Height School in the Seattle area reported students working in a satisfactory relaxed atmosphere.² Old Bonhomme School, St. Louis County, Missouri, favors the ungraded group.³

Such a school as this is a way of approaching problems of school function, curriculum organization and classroom organization.

¹See p. 14.

²See p. 13.

³See p. 19.

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