

Nongraded Programs: What Progress?

AMONG the most perplexing realities which continuously recur in the life of every teacher are the marked differences in achievement, intelligence, motivation, cultural and experiential background, and physical and social maturity which exist within any group of learners. For decades educators have given lip service to the need for teaching children as individuals and for providing more adequately for individual differences. They have conducted extensive research in child development over nearly a half-century, have studied insights gained by teachers during two decades of participation in child study programs, and have noted the continuing research in perception, learning and personality. All these have demonstrated that learning is most effective when it is meaningful and is related to the individual needs, perceptions and interests of the learner, when it begins where the learner is, and when it is perceived by

the learner as enhancing his own self-concept.

Yet, in spite of these influences, until recently no break-through has been achieved toward fully implementing the principles of individual differences. The critical reexamination of American education which has been carried on by educators and lay groups since 1957 has resulted in the development of fresh new approaches to age-old problems in education. During this period also, novel but promising approaches toward solution of an educational problem which heretofore has gone largely unnoticed, have suddenly come under closer scrutiny and have become the focal point for intensive study and experimentation.

One such approach and type of organization is the nongraded school. This arrangement provides a flexible grouping and organization of curriculum content that enable children of varying abilities and rates of maturing to experience continuous progress in learning. Although the specific details of nongraded organization vary in different school systems where it is being used, certain general characteristics may be noted.¹ In most of these schools the nongraded organization functions only during the primary years, but often is linked with the kindergarten program. A few schools are experimenting with this type of organization in the intermediate years.

The nongraded type of organization appears to have had the greatest influence on the program and pattern of grouping in reading. Characteristically, the reading experiences of the primary years are organized into eight to ten

¹ For a comprehensive discussion of the nongraded school, see John I. Goodland and Robert H. Anderson, *The Nongraded Elementary School*, New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1959. Also see various articles appearing in educational journals.

sequential steps or levels through which each child moves at his own rate. Probably its most unique feature is the flexibility possible in moving a child from group to group or from one classroom to another at any time his growth warrants such a change.

In an effort to assess the present status of nongraded programs, this writer analyzed questionnaire responses from 14 representative systems, many of which have used some type of nongraded pattern of organization for three years or more.²

Impetus for Initiating Program

The most frequently mentioned reason for adopting a nongraded type of organization was a growing dissatisfaction which teachers and administrators expressed regarding promotional policies they had been using. In many cases this dissatisfaction was echoed also by parents. Several respondents felt that the nongraded program might give them a longer period of time for studying the progress of individual pupils before making a decision on retention. It was hoped, too, that such a plan might result in larger numbers of children completing the primary program in the normal period of time. Many respondents mentioned their desire to eliminate the feeling of frustration children have as the result of failure.

An important impetus in the initiation of these programs was the strong conviction held by key administrators and teachers that educational practice

should be more consistent with what is known concerning individual differences. The nongraded type of organization seemed to hold promise of fuller realization of development and learning for all children. Other educators were dissatisfied with the achievement of their students in reading and language arts. They believed that reading performance would improve in a nongraded program in which children move to successive levels only when they are ready for that level.

What were the educational and philosophical considerations which prompted these respondents to change their attitude toward a nongraded program?

The administrators and faculty members believed that: (a) learning should be continuous; (b) children grow and learn at different rates and each should have the opportunity to achieve at his own rate; (c) the school program should be flexible so as to meet varying developmental needs and growth patterns of individual children; and (d) greater achievement will result when children experience success in school.

Nearly all respondents indicated that an initial and continuing orientation is used to acquaint teaching staff and parents with the objectives and operation of the nongraded program. Typically, a study by the faculty has preceded its introduction. In some schools parents have participated with teachers in the preparation of orientation materials and in the development of a new report card. It seems clear that the general acceptance of the nongraded program by communities using it is due in no small measure to the careful and continuing orientation of both staff and parents.

Hugh V. Perkins is Professor of Education, University of Maryland, College Park.

²The writer is indebted to the following school systems which responded to this survey: Corona and Torrance, California; Pocatello, Idaho; Moline and Park Forest, Illinois; Baltimore and Germantown, Maryland; Marblehead, Massachusetts; Dearborn, Michigan; Reno, Nevada; Dayton and Youngstown, Ohio; Savannah, Georgia; and Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

Respondents report that the chief advantages of the nongraded pattern of organization are these: fewer children are retained, children's progress in learning is greater and more continuous, flexibility in grouping has succeeded in fitting the educational program more closely to the needs and maturity of the individual child, and pressures for achievement and maintaining standards have been eliminated or markedly reduced. In addition, some nongraded schools report: an improvement in teacher-parent rapport; slower children are identified earlier; higher teacher and pupil morale; and increased teamwork among teachers and between teachers and parents. Moreover, when learning experiences are tailored to the needs of the individual, curriculum takes on new meaning. The flexibility inherent in the nongraded program permits the use of team teaching approaches and allows teachers to work with the same group more than one year.

Disadvantages noted were that some teachers and parents find absence of specific grade standards difficult to accept. Teaching a nongraded group requires more work of the teacher, but it also is apparently more satisfying. Several respondents mentioned the increased time and effort required in keeping records. Another mentioned the problem of articulating the "levels" program with other subject areas such as arithmetic and social studies. Finally, several report problems relating to the orientation and adjustment of new teachers to the nongraded program. One reports difficulty in finding teachers who are willing to work with the less mature or the slow learner. Another holds that a few teachers may use absence of grade levels as an excuse for their own indifferent performance.

More Evaluation Needed

Much of the evaluation of nongraded programs has been informal and has consisted of questionnaire reactions of parents and teachers, observed behavioral changes in individual children, and comparisons of achievement test scores. Collectively, these evaluations show that children are making significantly greater progress in reading achievement than are matched children in traditional classrooms, and that the reactions of parents and teachers are in general favorable.³ The nongraded pattern appears to be especially facilitative in enabling the more capable children to achieve advanced reading skills and to proceed toward independent reading much sooner than previously.

Shapski found that children in a nongraded program scored significantly higher than did matched controls in traditional graded schools. She also found that children at all ability levels benefited from the individualized flexible program, with those of superior intelligence making the greatest gains of all. In addition, Shapski found that under the nongraded plan less than half as many children of average or low average intelligence spend four years in the primary program as would occur if the decision on promotion was rendered at the end of their first year of school.⁴

The marked increase in interest shown and the adoption of some kind of nongraded organization by hundreds of schools each year indicate clearly the need for more controlled and definitive

³ Vivien Ingram. "Flint Evaluates Its Primary Cycle." *Elementary School Journal* 81: 76-80; November 1960.

⁴ Mary K. Shapski. "Ungraded Primary Reading Programs: An Objective Evaluation." *Elementary School Journal* 61: 41-45; October 1960.

studies of nongraded programs. What are the effects of this type of experience on other areas of children's learning and development? We need to learn much more concerning the effects of these programs through carefully controlled studies which assess the changes in children's self concepts, levels of anxiety, levels of aspiration and feelings of self-esteem, increase in peer status, and changes in other skill and subject areas. Only then can the effectiveness of these programs be ascertained, the findings used to make needed improvements, and the knowledge gained for adapting and modifying a general structure to fit the specific needs of a particular school and community. Some of these studies are already under way, but many more are needed.

A Look to the Future

The mounting widespread interest in and acceptance of the nongraded program mark this movement as one which is likely to have a strong influence on future educational programs and organization. It is evident that this arrangement implements in educational practice much that we now know about individual differences. Too, in the freedom given the learner to proceed at his own pace, in the lessening of pressures, and in opportunities given each child to experience success, the nongraded program brings to fuller realization the qualities of a favorable climate for learning.

On the other hand, some rather obvious limitations and pitfalls have been noted in nongraded patterns of organization. First, in most nongraded schools the individualization of instruction has been confined to reading. While reading is a skill of central importance, it is ap-

parent that individualization and pacing of instruction leading to increased achievement in other areas also are long overdue. Secondly, there is danger that without a strong commitment to a program based on the individual rates of maturing and needs of children, the sequence of stepwise levels may result in the replacing of grade standards by another set of standards different in name only.

Finally, with the nongraded pattern having proved successful in many schools which planned carefully in orienting teachers and parents prior to its introduction, there is great danger that other school systems will jump on a nongraded bandwagon without an adequate preparation of staff and community. Experience suggests that schools should prepare carefully and begin slowly so that the nongraded program which emerges is one that is tailored to particular children of a particular school and community. Planning for children's development should not result in a mad dash for the new look merely so that educators and parents may feel that they are educationally outfitted in the latest style!

Much of the potential of the nongraded patterns is as yet untapped. Thus far, it has been used primarily as an organizational device for grouping pupils, yet it has the potential for becoming much more than this. This more valid view of children and their development calls for new approaches to the curriculum. The exploding increase in knowledge emphasizes the need for sequential organization of content so that individualization and pacing of instruction can be carried out in all fields. In truth, our lives are too short and our needs are too great for us to afford the luxury of children's being bound to rigid stand-

(Continued on page 194)

I too am worried, not so much about Kim Chung Suk, as about the conditions which he symbolizes. How can formal education in Korea—or in my own country for that matter—be more closely related to the problems and needs of the nation and to their solution. A program in which greatest emphasis is on memorization and predicted answers fails to stir the creative power that is desperately needed for the salvation of a country that is in transition from ox to jet.

The descendants of men who invented the first moveable type made of metal and the first armored boats, as well as astronomical instruments, a mariner's compass, a suspension bridge and a phonetic alphabet, should have a better education in their schools. At the same time that minds are disciplined to think and to gain the tools of thought, there should be opportunity for exercise of thought on problems that make a difference in men's lives. As Korean students grow in experience and power, they will have to conceive of improved exploitation and conservation of natural resources, of improved irrigation, of increased hydroelectric power and of the industries that such power makes possible. They will have to develop export items for trade. They will have to find ways to unite and strengthen their country.

I would not have less art and less poetry, or less concern for the literature of other nations, including the works of Ernest Hemingway, or less sensitivity to the beauty of the Korean countryside. But I would have greater freedom for children to do some thinking on their own, more emphasis on the quality of learning in a school and less on the minutiae which tend to characterize a competitive entrance examination, greater freedom for schools to try out new ways of working even if they make

mistakes, closer relationship between school and the family, and a larger destiny for the young men of the universities than the replication of their own learning.

—DON SUDLOW, *Chairman of the Division of Fine Arts and Professor of Art, San Fernando Valley State College, Northridge, California.*

Nongraded Programs

(Continued from page 169)

ards and inflexible segments of content organized as grades through which students pass in lock-step fashion.

The nongraded pattern of organization, together with the body of philosophical and psychological principles which give it meaning, has the opportunity for influencing profoundly the pattern and organization of elementary education in America and possibly secondary and higher education as well. The extent to which this influence results in educational change will depend upon those of us who use and develop its pattern and philosophy.

A look into the future might hopefully reveal innumerable varieties and types of individualized, self-paced patterns of instruction, each developed as a result of thoughtful planning and continuous evaluation in relation to the unique needs of students and community. In a broader context, one might hope that the knowledge gained in the development of this and other instructional patterns might lead to a more comprehensive and functional understanding of how human beings learn and develop. The extent to which these hopes are realized depends upon the wisdom and commitment of those of us who labor in these vineyards.

Copyright © 1961 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.