

# A Critique: The Appropriate Placement School

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**A**DMIT them, classify them, and cast them into molds! Ostensibly, this is B. Frank Brown's formula for appropriately placing students in the programs of the public schools. In his book, *The Appropriate Placement School: A Sophisticated Nongraded Curriculum*,<sup>1</sup> Dr. Brown suggests that school officials turn to standardized tests for the answers. And indeed, administrators do so. Homogenize the students, compartmentalize them, and move them on in terms of percentile scores. These form the nub of Dr. Brown's thesis.

Evidently it matters little that students' experiences, perceptions based on their experiences, and values differ from student to student. Throughout the nation, far too many administrators continue to prescribe the Brown formula for the education of students under their jurisdiction. After all, it is much easier to standardize students along "clear-cut tracks." Little fuss, little imagination. I simply must confess that I find the ideas in this book neither sophisticated, nor reflecting a nongraded point of view.

Dr. Brown bases the content of his book on the premises that "what the schools need most is not simply money, but radical and revolutionary changes. . . . that new ways of learning must be rapidly developed and installed in the schools if we are to maintain an intellectual balance between the acquisition and the absorption of new knowledge."<sup>2</sup> And on these two points he chooses to remain silent throughout his book. The shortcomings of his views are clearly reflected in the hasty-sketchy treatment of his premises.

Indeed, one might readily challenge Dr. Brown's opinions that the

<sup>1</sup> B. Frank Brown. *The Appropriate Placement School: A Sophisticated Nongraded Curriculum*. West Nyack, New York: Parker Publishing Company, 1965.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

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function of the public school must be to maintain a balance between acquisition and absorption of new knowledge, or that his programs for the schools as described do constitute radical and revolutionary change. However, this would entail a rather lengthy and detailed examination of what actually constitutes "knowledge" and "change," and might better be dealt with in the course of another treatise.

### "Multiphased Curriculum"

It is with Dr. Brown's ideas on the "multiphased curriculum" as prescribed for the programs of the elementary schools that I take issue. The programs of the middle and secondary schools are left to the examination of others more eminently qualified than I. B. Frank Brown is of the opinion that all children should begin their schooling on the basis of verbal achievement tests; that they should be tested on their fifth birthdays; and that their school programs should be multiphased.<sup>3</sup> He would have us turn to commercial testing organizations such as the Educational Testing Service or Science Research Associates, Inc., for rational designs and acceptable indices to child-preparedness for school work.<sup>4</sup>

Multiphasing, according to Dr. Brown, should be based on standardized test results. Thus children who rank below the 30th percentile in verbal achievement should spend two years in kindergarten; those scoring between the 30th and 50th percentiles should spend one year in kindergarten; and children who achieve above the 50th percentile should enter directly into primary school.<sup>5</sup> Dr. Brown does not offer a rational design for this point of view; nor does he make even a mild attempt to explain his position. Presumably he believes that standardized tests are the only means for properly diagnosing students, and that students who fall within designated percentile scores must spend the allotted time in the prescribed program, irrespective of objectives, learning rate, and individual growth unique to each student.

In my judgment, Dr. Brown's multiphased program for nongrading the elementary schools is hastily conceived and sketchily defined, and encompasses an academically sterile plan for the appropriate placement of students. Item analyses of the standardized tests recommended by Dr. Brown for purposes of evaluating students would clearly reveal, in fact, that the tests exhibit serious shortcomings in terms of *bona fide* diagnosis of student potential.

Dr. Brown places undue emphasis on achievement as the sole criterion for student placement and progress in the elementary school. He neglects other essential considerations. First, he does not take into account that what a given individual or group achieves is not necessarily achievable by any other individual or group; second, he does not recognize knowledge as a process in which inquiry, intuitive and systematic investigation, innovation, confrontation of conflicts, and consideration of alternatives also take place; third, he dismisses essential ingredients of diagnosis which take into account appropriate teachers and peer groups for the children under diagnosis.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

B. Frank Brown's insistence that standardized tests are the key to a truly "sophisticated, nongraded" curriculum is subject to dispute. To suggest that elementary school students should proceed along tracks based on percentile scores is to ignore what is already known about children, curriculum, and the learning process. Confining students within boundaries imposed by percentile scores gives no recognition to well-documented theories that for different students learning is generated at different rates, under differing conditions, in different environments, at differing times. Nor does the track system take into account that, because children perceive differently, they learn and progress differently, each and every one in his own way, in his own time, according to what is of value to each.

## Nongraded Aspects

The multiphased curriculum advocated by Dr. Brown is nebulous and fuzzy. The nongraded aspects of the plan fail to come into view. Statements which suggest that students who achieve between the 10th and 25th percentiles on a standardized test for primary school children "should spend a *considerable part* of the day *studying* reading, speaking, and listening"; students who achieve a score between the 25th and 45th percentiles "should concentrate *heavily*, but *less* than the above"; students who attain percentile scores between the 45th and 70th percentiles should spend "only a *normal* amount of time in reading, listening, and speaking," and "begin to delve *seriously* into science"; students who score above the 70th percentile "can range *broadly* in their studies" <sup>6</sup> [my emphasis] do not by any stretch of the imagination reflect the philosophy of the nongraded school.

Words such as "considerable," "heavily," "less," "normal," "seriously," and "broadly" used by Dr. Brown to describe his nongraded program lack preciseness and reveal little. Terms such as "a normal amount of time" and "begin to delve seriously into science" reflect compartmentalized points of view. Indeed, is delving seriously into science appropriate only for those students who rank in the top third of the student population according to standardized test results? For there is little doubt that children delve into science naturally and with interest, notwithstanding achievement levels, from the moment they become aware of surroundings—long before their exposure to the inflexible, prescribed, yet undefined, program of the "appropriate placement school."

Furthermore, take the recommended curriculum in the science program of the intermediate school. Here B. Frank Brown advocates that students who score between the 30th and 65th percentiles on a standardized test should be placed in Curriculum Phase #2, a program for students who "learn science in an average way." Students who fall within the 65th to 99th percentile range, adds Dr. Brown, should be put into Curriculum Phase #3, a program for students with "proven achievement and interest in science." <sup>7</sup> Precisely what is learning science in an "average way"? What determines students' interest in science? Dr. Brown chooses to be silent here.

To box students in step and place; to "level them off" on the basis of

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 67-68.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

test scores is out of keeping with the continuous, intermittent progress philosophy of the nongraded school. In my judgment, Dr. Brown's thesis reflects a rigid, graded point of view.

In one of his infrequent attempts to build a rationale for the establishment of the appropriate placement school, Dr. Brown states that a given student is capable of doing seventh grade mathematics, is reading at the third grade level, may have a fourth grade knowledge of science, and can do fifth grade work in art.<sup>8</sup> I agree with him in intent. However, this is not of the essence. What should be examined, rather, is in what aspect of reading, etc.? in which context? relative to what specific objective? can the student be "nongraded." Indeed, what is "fifth grade art"? What is a "fourth grade knowledge of science"? Dr. Brown provides no answers.

It is clear that more specific diagnostic procedures for appropriately placing students in the programs of the elementary school than those provided by the standardized tests recommended by Dr. Brown are in order. "Phasing" on the basis of standardized test results is clearly not the answer; nor does "phasing" constitute a nongraded plan of action.

What is needed is *bona fide* diagnosis of the objectives uniquely appropriate for each learner, the learner's position in terms of the objectives, the peer groups essential to the learner's progress, the teacher(s) who can best facilitate the learning experiences required, the appropriate strategies for putting the experiences into action, and the subsequent assessment of the strategies.

Diagnosis for appropriate placement of students should also take into account both the teacher's and learner's degree of toleration for one another, their self-concepts, the teaching and learning style of each, and the reward systems to which both respond. Needless to say, the recommendations made by B. Frank Brown in his book, *The Appropriate Placement School: A Sophisticated Nongraded Curriculum*, fall far short of essential diagnostic procedures for nongrading the programs of the elementary school. □

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

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