

How Individualized Is the Nongraded School?

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THE nongraded elementary school appears to be one of the most discussed topics in education today. Keppel wrote of the nongraded school, ". . . the spread has been rapid, even dramatic. It is probably the fastest-moving innovation on the American elementary school scene."¹

The attempt to individualize instruction within classrooms has been one of the main reasons for the emergence of nongraded schools. Authorities in elementary school education realize that learning can best be accomplished by recognizing differences within an individual and among pupils. Nongrading, according to its proponents, maximizes individualized instruction since it is designed to provide for continuous pupil progress within a flexible situation and a permissive climate.

This article reports a recent investigation of the extent to which instruction was individualized in a selected number of nongraded schools.²

¹ Francis Keppel. *The Necessary Revolution in American Education*. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1966. p. 101.

² Glenn R. Johnson. "An Investigation of the Classroom Related Activities in a Selected Number of Nongraded Elementary School Classrooms." Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1968.

Ideally, to assess the extent to which instruction is individualized would involve a careful case study of each individual child over an extended period of time. It could be argued that only by "being inside the child's mind" could the investigator determine whether instruction is appropriate for the child. It was necessary, therefore, to describe the conditions under which it was most likely that instruction would be individualized—we have called these indicators of individualized instruction—then to determine the extent to which these indicators were present or absent in any given classroom.

The classroom related activities were viewed from three different perspectives: the teacher's perception (interviews), the observer's perception (interaction analysis and anecdotal notes), and the pupil's perception (pupil diaries).

The interviews revealed that the teachers usually used some materials commonly reserved for advanced levels or lower levels,

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and the materials tended to span three or more grade levels in three or more subjects. Teachers perceived several advantages of nongraded classrooms. Among these advantages of the nongraded approach were the following: it enabled pupils to progress at their own rate and level, it built a more personal relationship among the pupils and between the pupils and the teacher, it encouraged teachers to focus on the needs of the pupils, and it offered more freedom and responsibility to the pupils.

The teachers also revealed that they had a difficult time providing a variety of materials on different levels and for a diversity of interests, it was difficult to know what each pupil was doing at any given time, it was hard to find the time to plan for differences among the pupils, and specific state requirements for pupil accounting and curriculum created some difficulty.

Grade Labels

The investigator noted an interesting similarity during interviews with three teachers even though each taught in a different school; the three schools, however, were located in New York State. Stated as simply as possible, grade labels would creep into the conversations. When questioned about this, the teachers generally replied that the pupils in the classroom were graded according to ability, but the classroom was nongraded and not considered a fourth, fifth, or sixth grade classroom. Furthermore, the pupils worked on different levels, and publications

available from each school stated that classes accepted individual differences in all phases of a child's development. The investigator explored the topic with the building principals and was told that New York State required an annual attendance report by grade levels; and the state required that certain curriculum topics must be taught at designated grade levels.

Some unanswered questions come to mind: Do state guides, requiring certain topics to be covered in particular grades, cause teachers to remain cognizant of grade labels while working with pupils? Do state reports, requiring pupil accounting by grades, cause schools to remain mindful of grade labels? When teachers are subjected to grade labels under such conditions, do they find it difficult to disregard completely the term "grade"? When teachers have had 16 years of graded school experiences from the time they started their own education in first grade and progressed through graduation from college, have grade labels been cemented into their own minds for such a long period of time that it is difficult for them to disregard completely such experiences when they begin to teach?

The investigator's observations during reading, arithmetic, and social studies revealed considerable variation among the classroom teachers regarding individual instruction, independent study, small group arrangements, and direct and indirect teacher influence. In several classrooms, the pupils instructed other pupils. One modification existed in those classrooms where reading,

arithmetic, and social studies were conducted simultaneously.

The pupils' diaries also revealed noticeable differences among the nongraded classrooms in the number of different activities and the number of pupils engaged in each type of activity. The classes differed markedly in the extent of flexibility, scope of pupil incidences of individualized instruction, percent of the total time each classroom devoted to individualized instruction, and patterns of time allocation.

When pupil diaries were cross-referenced for three days, analysis sometimes revealed that pupils were engaged in the same activity but at different times. Furthermore, what a teacher may express or an observer note as provision for individualized instruction, pupil diaries may reveal as a large group arrangement providing only for variations in rate or time needed to complete an assignment.

The findings lead one to draw certain conclusions. From the considerable variation among the classrooms, one infers that replacing grade labels with some other designation and expressing pupil growth as continuous pupil progress do not guarantee that all pupils will receive individualized instruction. Furthermore, preparing for differences among pupils and within the individual involves flexibility, a diversity of activities, and materials commensurate with various levels of ability and a variety of interests. Organizing the classroom to take into consideration all of these factors requires great skill.

Need for Growth

The findings did not indicate a relationship between patterns of time allocation and the extent of individualized instruction. Also, the findings did not indicate a relationship between the classroom climate and the extent of individualized instruction. There did not seem to be a consistency between the extent of individualized instruction for a specific content area and the degree of direct or indirect teacher influence revealed during observations of specific content areas.

Several recommendations are an out-

growth of the study. Educational systems responsible for teacher preparation and in-service training need to acquaint teachers with the nongraded structure. They need to help teachers develop skills in classroom organization and classroom management which provide a greater amount of individualized instruction.

Teachers need assistance in developing a variety of procedures for evaluating and recording pupil progress, grouping youngsters, assessing the needs of individuals, and providing freedom for children to pursue areas of interest.

Classroom teachers should have the time to enrich their backgrounds in many areas of interest to children; and the pressure to cover specific content or a particular course of study should be alleviated.

If teachers are to individualize instruction successfully, new techniques need to be developed to help identify what pupils are doing during any given time of the school day. The role of the teacher should move toward one of helping individuals learn and away from one of telling pupils what they should learn.

If one wishes to evaluate the effectiveness of nongraded classrooms in individualizing instruction, the researcher must go beyond labels and what personnel espouse. Investigators should use instruments similar to those employed in this study to determine the degree of individualized instruction existing in nongraded schools.

The study revealed considerable variation in extent of individualized instruction in nongraded classrooms. It would be valuable to replicate the present study in "graded" classrooms in order to determine the extent of individualized instruction in graded classrooms.

The present study used Flanders' Interaction Analysis. Future studies involving nongraded classrooms might provide valuable information if techniques involving teaching strategies related to cognitive learning are included in the studies. □

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