

NONGRADEDNESS? ONE VIEW

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NONGRADEDNESS is a term that is often carelessly used and usually too little understood. Never mind its muddled history, never mind the looseness with which the term is bandied about: when we examine the philosophy and the full meaning of nongradedness, we recognize it as one of the most significant and effective arrangements on the world educational scene. Uncounted implementation attempts have been made on large and small scales and under a variety of labels. Yet nongradedness, under whatever name, has unfortunately not become the standard practice in the United States.

No idea can have much impact until it is thoroughly understood. There is increasing reason to believe that an idea must be actively promoted by those responsible for educational leadership: principals, supervisors, and teacher educators. Without such support it is unlikely that classroom teachers will be able to make nongradedness happen. So—what have *you* done for the nongradedness cause lately?

Maybe you, like many other educators, are now supporting the British import called open or informal education and have dropped your support for nongradedness. In doing so,

you do a disservice to both movements. The links between nongradedness and the developments in Great Britain will be discussed later in this article.

Even though excellent examples of nongraded schools are all too rare, there has accumulated solid evidence of the value of nongradedness. When I recently summarized 16 research studies comparing schools having nongraded or open classrooms with graded classrooms, the following tendencies were noted: (a) comparisons using standardized achievement tests continue to favor nongradedness, (b) comparisons using a mental health component have results that favor nongrading, (c) fewer children spend longer-than-usual time in nongraded schools, and (d) it is particularly beneficial for blacks, boys, and underachievers to be in a nongraded environment.¹

My review of the nongraded literature also revealed that there has been a gradual

¹ For a more complete description, see: Barbara Nelson Pavan. "Good News: Research on the Nongraded Elementary School." *Elementary School Journal*, in press.

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evolution of the concept, with a shift from merely organization and administrative types of programs (such as a sequence of levels in mathematics and reading) toward a more humanistic or child-oriented approach. Much of the writing published in the late 1950's and early 1960's defined the nongraded school as one in which each child is allowed to progress at his own rate through a predetermined sequence of levels in the various subject matter disciplines. After the launching of Sputnik, massive curriculum reforms emphasized the structure of the disciplines; and this, along with the development of programmed instruction, undoubtedly had the effect of reinforcing the levels-oriented definitions of nongrading.

More recently Tewksbury, Hillson and Bongo, and Lee Smith have written books which present detailed plans for a levels organization of subject matter.² These have helped the nongraded cause, but have regrettably created an impression that levels are the ultimate and total nongraded package. In this package, the subject matter previously included in a particular grade is divided into three, four, or more segments or levels.

The end-of-the-year anxiety of "Will I pass?" has been eliminated, but in its stead the child now confronts at least four hurdles in each subject area. Usually a change in level is shown on the quarterly progress report. Parents assume that the child should complete one level in reading and mathematics each quarter. Therefore, what pressures have been removed from the child? The end-of-the-year fear is now experienced four times per year rather than once.

The reader may think, correctly, that a levels plan should not operate in this manner; but, in reality, concern about the level can be more dominant in the child's life than pride in a task well done. The question

remains—what significant changes have been made in the total fabric of the school?

Certainly the advocates of nongradedness did not have in mind an increase in the possibilities for failure. The nongraded concept was and is an attempt to deal with the fact that *individuals are different and different treatments are needed to maximize each individual's potential*. If all children in a school are required to work through the same sequence of activities, the only difference in the program being offered is to allow each child to work at his own rate of speed. In what way has this type of program acknowledged that some children learn pictorially, some through verbal abstractions, some by concrete or abstract manipulation of materials or ideas, some by thinking out loud, and on and on?

The following five statements are from a set of 36 which I sent to 48 educators well known in the nongraded literature, as part of my thesis research.³ They were requested to indicate if each statement is crucial, important, of minor importance, or not important in a comprehensive definition of nongradedness.

1. Each individual is unique and is accorded dignity and respect. Differences in people are valued. Therefore, the school should strive to increase the variability of individual differences rather than to stress conformity.
2. The unique needs, interests, abilities, and learning rates, styles, and patterns of each child will determine his individual curriculum. Conformity and rigidity are not demanded.
3. Different people learn in different ways.
4. Learning is the result of the student's interaction with the world he inhabits. An individual learns by direct experience and manipulation of his environment; therefore the child must be allowed to explore, to experiment, to mess around, to play, and to have freedom to err.
5. Successful completion of challenging

² John L. Tewksbury. *Nongrading in the Elementary School*. Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Co., 1967; Maurie Hillson and Joseph Bongo. *Continuous Progress Education: A Practical Approach*. Palo Alto, California: Science Research Associates, 1971; Lee L. Smith. *Teaching in a Nongraded School*. West Nyack, New York: Parker Publishing Co., 1970.

³ Barbara Nelson Pavan. "Moving Elementary Schools Toward Nongradedness: Commitment, Assessment, and Tactics." Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Graduate School of Education, Harvard University, 1972.

experiences promotes greater confidence and motivation than fear of failure.

Responses to all 36 statements were extremely positive. For each of the preceding statements, at least 32 of the 39 respondents indicated the statements are crucial or important. None of these statements would justify a levels program as "true" or "ideal" nongradedness. However, all five statements are reflected in more humanistic programs where the emphasis is on the total child, not just his academic performance.

Links with British Developments

American educators have recently been flocking to Britain to see "open classrooms." In the best of these classrooms, the practices that may be observed are, significantly, closely attuned to the statements about nongradedness listed earlier. When British publications about open or informal education are examined, one finds that the source of their philosophy came, as did nongradedness, from certain understandings of child development and from the work of people such as John Dewey! Note especially the Plowden Report.⁴

If we examine the most recent trends in American education, we see a growing concern for humaneness (witness the very title of ASCD's 1970 Yearbook, *To Nurture Humaneness*⁵), for more individualized and less structured curriculum (witness Jerome Bruner's revision of *The Process of Education* in 1971⁶), and, as already noted, in more open education models. The ASCD 1972

⁴ Lady Bridget Plowden et al. *Children and Their Primary Schools: A Report of the Central Advisory Council for Education*. London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1967. Volume 1, Chapters 2 and 16.

⁵ Mary-Margaret Scobey and Grace Graham, editors. *To Nurture Humaneness: Commitment for the '70's*. ASCD 1970 Yearbook. Washington, D.C.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1970.

⁶ Jerome Bruner. "The Process of Education Reconsidered." In: Robert R. Leeper, editor. *Dare To Care/Dare To Act*. Washington, D.C.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1971. pp. 19-30.

Yearbook, *A New Look at Progressive Education*,⁷ is extremely helpful in detailing some of the parallels between progressive education and the British primary school model. It helps us to appreciate that the American receptivity to the British model is explained by the close connection between that model and the major movements in 20th century American education. Its roots run deep into our own past. The progressive movement disappeared under that label, but actually continued in a slightly modified form under the nongraded label; and now this thrust continues with the adoption of "open education" in this country.

"The nongraded concept was and is an attempt to deal with the fact that individuals are different and different treatments are needed to maximize each individual's potential."

We must investigate our history and realize that this movement toward openness has slowly evolved during the past century. It is not a fad and should not be regarded as such. It will, unless we acknowledge the similarities of the underlying principles on which all three—progressive, nongraded, and open education—are based. Open education is not a British import, but it is an outgrowth of nongradedness, which in turn developed out of the progressive movement.

The time for more sophisticated scholarship is upon us. Those in positions of educational leadership must understand the philosophy and history of the nongraded movement. Commitment to the principles underlying nongradedness must then be followed by energetic efforts that will enable classroom teachers to implement nongradedness throughout the country. The time is now. Let us not wait until a fourth rediscovery of nongradedness is made! □

⁷ James R. Squire, editor. *A New Look at Progressive Education*. ASCD 1972 Yearbook. Washington, D.C.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1972.

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