

Shaping Up the Shop: How School Organization Influences Teaching and Learning

It's time to knock down walls that separate teachers and students and build up collaborative teaching and learning.

The school improvement literature devotes far too little attention to how more effective alternatives to the graded, self-contained, unit-age classrooms can influence children's learning and teachers' professional growth. The way that we organize schools, both vertically through the K-12 system and horizontally at each successive moment, can be either a positive, nurturant force or a negative, damaging one.

Curiously, no research reported either prior to the organizational reform period of the 1950s and '60s or subsequently confirms the effectiveness of the self-contained classroom. Similarly, the lock-step graded structure has few friends except among the publishers, whose graded textbooks delight their stockholders and dictate the nationwide curriculum, and among those teachers who owe their survival to a pat-and-ready textbook.

The lessons of over a century's efforts to find more humane and effective options to gradedness (notably John Dewey's laboratory school, the various strands of progressive education that followed, the Dalton Plan, the Winnetka Plan, Activity Schools, ungraded primary programs in Wisconsin, nongraded elementary and secondary pilot programs, middle schools, open education) mostly have

been forgotten. Similarly, efforts to break away from the "lone-wolf" approach to teaching (Dewey's "cooperative social organization," Hosis's Cooperative Group Plan, the Dual Progress Plan, the Bay City and Yale-Fairfield plans for using teacher aides, team teaching, differentiated staffing, multi-unit schools) have lost momentum. Some recent studies, however, suggest that nongradedness and teaming remain alive. What may be needed is a massive new effort to vitalize and extend them.

Recent research on effective schools and effective management practice compels us once again to attempt to set up schools, classes, pupil groups, and promotion policies that help to unlock the creative potential of children and their mentors. Many students of effective corporations, for example, conclude that productivity increases when people are organized around tasks in work groups, both permanent and temporary. The "quality circle" is one familiar group form that can stimulate corporate success and worker satisfaction. Work groups are the building blocks of productive organizations, and networks of work groups compose an atomized corporate structure. Interaction is the central ingredient in each worker's daily experience.

And so should it be in schools. Teachers should work together, not in

isolation. Every day teachers should experience something akin to a graduate seminar, clinically oriented, in child learning and in pedagogy. For their part, children should interact daily with a number of adults who share responsibility for their learning and with other children of similar and different interests, talents, and backgrounds. The essential organizational structure, with which thousands of schools have already had some experience through Individually Guided Education and similar excellent plans, would feature a combination of nongradedness, multi-age pupil groups, cooperative teaching linked with differentiated staffing, and flexible, shared space.

Within such a structure, any rational curriculum would have a far greater chance to succeed, and policies that respect children and nurture their growth could have far more positive impact. No body of research or of carefully analyzed experience disproves the validity of such a structure. An abundance of evidence, on the other hand, suggests that the conventional structure should be scrapped. It's time to shape up the shop! □

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