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READING IN THE UNGRADED SCHOOL

Gordon F. Evans

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Let us take a look with Goodlad and Anderson (4) at a typical classroom of two or three decades ago. The students were seated by unwritten law—the first graders by the windows, the eighth graders on the other side of the room by the blackboard, and the rest in between according to grade. Our attention is drawn at once to a seat near the window where Ernie is trying to fit himself into a much-too-small seat, long lanky legs, of necessity, in the aisle. The pale face under the shock of carrot-red hair makes Ernie look as though he might be made up as a clown for the school fair. But Ernie is not made up. Ernie is very real, with an IQ of about 68. He has occupied that seat by the window for seven years. Why? Well, you cannot move across the room with the other children when you cannot read as well as they read. There are standards, and those standards require that a third grader read as a third grader should, and that a seventh grader read as a seventh grader should. Ernie is not as bad off as he might be, however. If he were in a large school system, the other children his size would be moved on to a different room. At least here he is in the same room with them, and he can associate with them and play with them. Or can he? They do not want him around. He loses his temper. They complain that he uses abusive language. Poor Ernie is a misfit. He cannot read with them, and he cannot play with them.

To Help Ernie—And Others

In a modern ungraded classroom Ernie would not be a misfit. There would be other tall children, there would be short ones, thin ones, chubby ones. These physical features would be of no major concern. Thus the individual child would be given opportunity to reach his potential in all areas of development—physically, emotionally, socially, and intellectually, without undue pressures or frustrations. (2)

Even though a teacher is labeled as, say, a third grade teacher, he is a teacher of second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth, even seventh grade learners. The lock-step graded system described by Brinkman (1) appearing in the elementary schools today was copied from European schools. Because of the expanding population before the turn of the

century it was decided, for efficiency's sake, to package just so much of the three R's and distribute them on eight rigid levels. Teachers have become slaves to grades, report cards, and routine promotion. Ernie was the victim of such an enslaved teacher. The gay nineties saw a number of experimental efforts to break down patterns of elementary school organization. In fact, records go back as far as 1888 when educators were denouncing the lock-step method of instruction. Educators were beginning to feel that all students did not need to go forward at the same pace, using the same books, covering the same amount of material, with the same degree of thoroughness. Between the twenties and thirties teachers began forming each class into three reading groups. However, according to Stauffer (8) they still could not find enough time for individualized instruction, and resorted to workbook activities for groups II and III. This resulted in a deterioration of the workbooks to mere "busy work" because the teacher did not have time to help the students or check the workbooks. Again, finding differences in achievement, intelligence, motivation, cultural and experiential backgrounds, and physical and social maturity, a solution to the problem had not been found.

Statistics compiled by Lichter (5) show that 40 percent of the children who enter the first grade become high school graduates. What does this mean? More than half of the children who were first graders just twelve years ago are now "drop-outs." Lichter says that most of these drop-outs had reading difficulties, and that of these there are 42 to 90 percent who also have emotional problems. Whether the reading difficulties caused the emotional problems or whether the emotional problems caused the reading difficulties has not, in the majority of cases, been determined. But with persistent good teaching and wise guidance many of these problems could be solved or even prevented, whatever their origin. Lichter (5) also says that a large percent of these drop-outs were underachievers of good mental ability and could have achieved more than they did. In comparing high school graduates with these drop-outs he found that some who drop out have higher intellectual capacity than some of those who graduate. Approximately half of the drop-outs have at least average intelligence, and some are even intellectually superior.

From the time a child enters first grade until he is graduated from high school, he is under undue pressure—from parents, teachers, and peers. He has come to school anxious to learn. Since reading is the

center of all learning, these pressures are focused on one thing—the child must learn to read, and the sooner the better. The mature child learns to read, the immature child does not. Perhaps his achievement is only half of the first grade reading material, yet he must go on to the second grade, poorly equipped, or be a failure at the ripe old age of seven. He is frustrated. He feels inferior, inadequate. He demonstrates his feelings in various ways. He may become jealous. Or suspicious. Or even vicious. If the child does repeat, he is forced to cover material that he has already mastered for the first three or four months. In an ungraded situation, he would begin his second year in school just where he left off, forming a continuous pattern of learning. Studies reported by Perkins (6) “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.”

Goodlad and Anderson (4) have estimated that even in the first grade there are from three to four years difference in children’s readiness to learn. They say that this difference in the range of ability increases rather than diminishes over the years so that by the time a child leaves the elementary grades this range may have increased to a difference of from six to eight years. By the fourth and fifth year of school more than half the achievement scores in a class are not at a specific grade level, but are above and below it.

Organization of the Ungraded Program

√ Since 1957 the limelight has been on the ungraded classroom. This plan allows for flexible grouping and the organization of the curriculum content so that children of varying abilities and rates of maturity may experience continuous progress in learning.

Various schools using an ungraded plan work out details to fit their individual needs. But generally speaking they all follow the basic pattern of omitting grade labels at the primary level, specifically in the field of reading. Some carry the program into arithmetic and other areas through the unit or activity-program method. √ Usually the reading program is organized into eight to ten consecutive levels through which each child moves at his own rate. One of the unique features of the ungraded reading program is its flexibility in moving

a student from one level to the next, or even from one room to the next, at any time during the year as achievement warrants. For example, Franklin and Perry (3) show “the primary unit in some ungraded schools corresponds to kindergarten through grade three which would, on the graded school plan, require four years to complete. On the ungraded plan, a few pupils might complete the work in less than four years and others might require more than four years. Bright children do not have to wait for their slower classmates, and slower children do not become frustrated trying to reach a goal beyond their capabilities. When a pupil does not complete all levels of work in the number of years usually assigned to the task, he spends additional time in the unit before he moves to the next unit. Since groups are ungraded and pupil placement is made at any time during the school year, status is not gained or lost when a pupil is changed from one group to another.”

In the ungraded primaries, Skapski (7) points out that “learning is so paced that the child may experience success at every step of the way. Slow learners are not pushed into learning to read before they are ready, a practice sometimes followed in the hope that the children will be able to ‘pass’ into second grade at the end of one year.

“Gifted children spend as little time as possible on the extremely simple reading matter at the preprimer and primer levels and can be given a good deal of enrichment material. In short, the aim of the ungraded primary is to insure that provisions are made to meet the individual differences.

“The ungraded primary, then, benefits all the children. Gifted children are not allowed to underachieve, nor are slow learners frustrated by repeated failure. All children progress steadily from level to level, each child at his own rate.”

The ungraded program is adapted to the growth spurts of the individual child. Some six-year-olds appear to be slow but speed up at seven and can make up for lost time in the flexible program of the ungraded school. Children who are so-called “late bloomers” because of a slow start, immaturity, absence, changes of locale, or illness do not face failure at the end of their first year, but are able to progress in a continued program. Further help can be given to individuals, as is illustrated in *Time*, March 22, 1963, (10) in its report on the Maple Park School in the Edmonds, Washington, School District. “Freed of cowering competition, ‘late bloomers’ may take off

suddenly, whisking through a year's work in a few weeks. For the bright but immature child, who may do three years' work in 1½ years, level eight is followed by an intellectual furlough; level nine for 'enrichment' reading and growing while glands catch up with brains. Levels ten to eighteen cover the usual grades three to six; level nineteen is another pause for extra-brights. Maple Park kids then go on to junior high school, some after only five years of school, some after seven." The report also tells that the school is so successful that people living outside its area have been known to smuggle in their children by parking them with legal residents. It closes with this simple and heartfelt judgment from one of the students: "You know where you are here."

Advantages for the Child

Schools that are using the ungraded system report numerous advantages. Some of the advantages sighted through research are: The educational program is fitted more closely to the individual child's needs and maturity through flexible grouping; pressures are reduced by eliminating grade standards and promotion and replacing them with individual adequacy and achievement, thus the children are made more aware of their own individual progress; the superior child is stimulated because there is no grade average to hold him back or to allow him to become self-satisfied, nor is he held back by the slow learners; for the slow learner the fear of failure is removed and frustration is reduced, there is no pressure for him to achieve beyond his ability; the mental health of the entire classroom is at a higher ebb, resulting from more responsible and mature behavior.

Stendler (9) maintains that "The ungraded organization attempts to facilitate a plan for continuous growth during the child's beginning school years. It is designed to eliminate retardation in the primary grades by organizing the first three years according to reading levels. About two percent take only two years and about the same number require four years, but each year they make continuous progress to the next highest level . . . Teachers, parents, and pupils have three years rather than one to accept the fact that the pupil will take four years to do the work normally accomplished in three. It is argued that there is less damage to the self-concept of the slow learner under such a plan than where pupils spend two years in the same grade."

Advantages for the Teacher and Parents

We have discussed the advantages of the ungraded classroom for the child. There are also advantages for the teacher and the parents. The teacher is more relaxed because there is a change of emphasis from grade content and standards to individual abilities and needs. End-of-the-term goals are eliminated in favor of individual achievement. There is encouragement of teamwork between teacher and teacher and between teacher and parent, thus providing a closer faculty-administration-parent cooperation. Because of the flexibility of the ungraded program, team teaching may be utilized to its fullest degree. It will allow teachers to work with the same group for more than one year and consequently some disciplinary problems are minimized.

Parent reactions range from that found in the Maple Park Elementary School where they smuggled their youngsters into the system to a complete adverse attitude. The main contributing factor to favorable parent acceptance is adequate preparation and initiation on the part of the school and its administration and teachers. The final impetus develops as the parents observe the increased interest the children and teachers show in their classwork, the continuity of progress, and increased achievement.

Problems of the Ungraded Program

Some of the problems of establishing an ungraded program should be considered. Some schools, on seeing the success of the program elsewhere, may be prone to swing to the ungraded program without adequate preparation of staff and community. Some grade-minded teachers find it difficult to orient themselves to an ungraded system. Some are hesitant to try something different. There must be a continued study, evaluation, and interpretation of the program by its initiators. Another contributing factor to the success or failure of the program is orientating the parents from grades, promotion, and retention to a progressive, developmental program.

Comparison of the Graded and Ungraded Programs

In comparing the structures of the ungraded and graded programs, Franklin and Perry (3) give the following basic assumptions.

Graded School

1. It is assumed that all children of the same chronological age will develop to the same extent in a given period of time.
2. A child who does not measure up to adult standards of what should be accomplished in nine months is called a "failure."
3. If a child "fails," he is required to repeat the grade in which he does not meet the standards.
4. A decision as to grade placement must be made after each nine months.
5. Grade placements are based largely on academic achievement in all areas.
6. Fixed standards of achievement within a set time put pressures upon teachers and children which cause emotional tensions and inhibit learning.

Ungraded School

1. It is assumed that each child has his own pattern and rate of growth, and that children of the same age will vary greatly in their ability and rate of maturation.
2. No child is ever considered a "failure." If he does not achieve in proportion to his ability, the staff studies the causes, and adjusts his program to fit his needs and problems.
3. A child never repeats. He may progress more slowly than others in the group, but individual records of progress make it possible to keep his growth continuous.
4. Decisions as to group placement can be made at any time during the three-year period. A fourth year may be needed for social, emotional, or maturative adjustment in the case of some students.
5. Group placement is flexible, based on physical, mental, social, and emotional maturity with emphasis on reading levels of achievement.
6. Elimination of pressures produces a relaxed learning situation conducive to good mental health.

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| <p>7. Grade-to-grade movements of pupils is rather inflexible, usually at the end of the year.</p> | <p>7. Pupils may be moved from one group to another at any time. There is some evidence of a trend toward controlling pupil advancement on a quarter or semester basis.</p> |
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