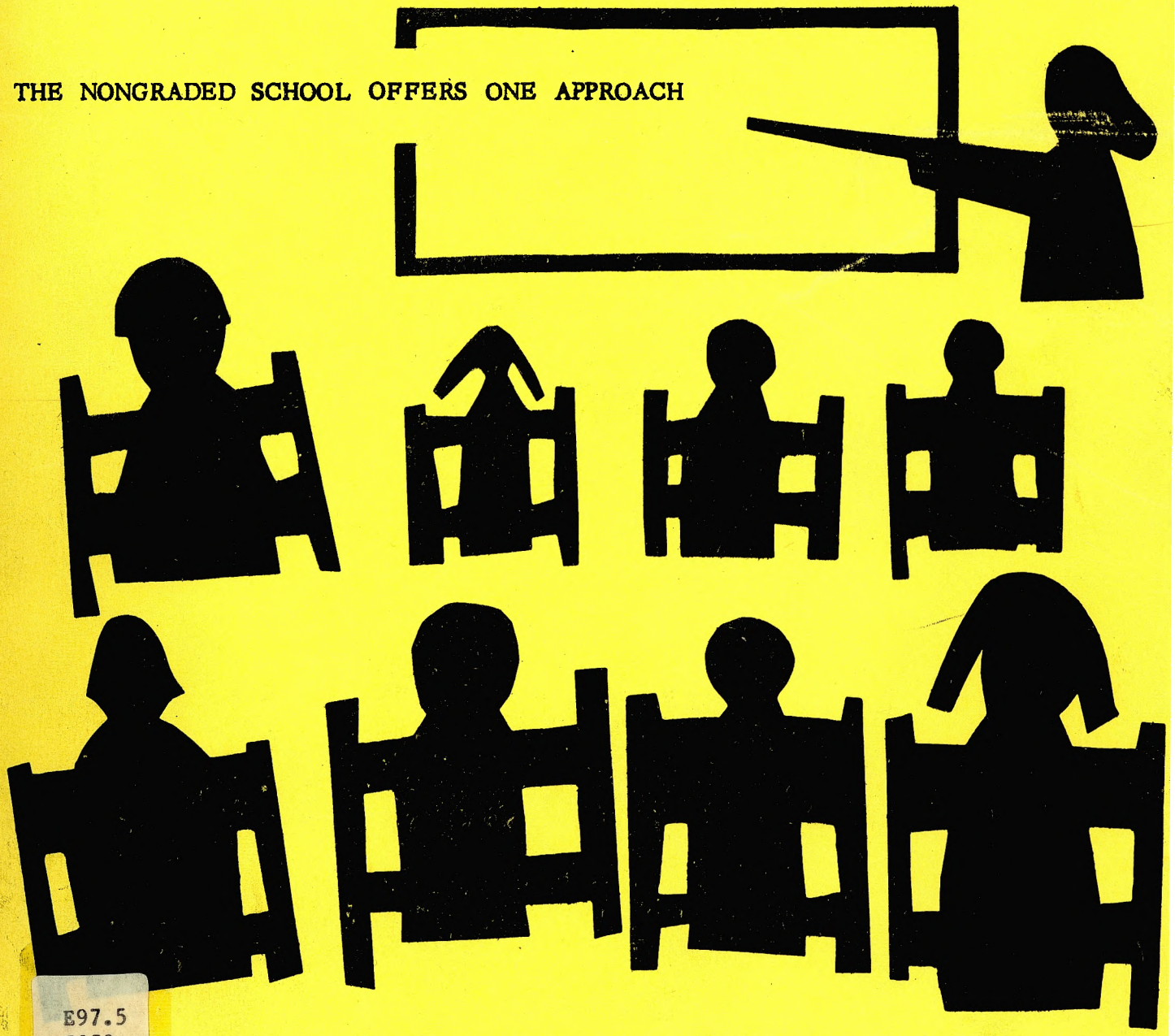
Teachers' In-service Bulletin

PROVIDING FOR INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES

THE NONGRADED SCHOOL OFFERS ONE APPROACH



Curriculum Section, Education Division
Department of N. A. & N. R.
Ottawa
1961

PROVIDING FOR INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES

The Nongraded School Offers One Approach

Issued under the authority of the
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Introductory Statement

In education we know much better than we do. This fact is particularly true in our concern for the individuality of each child who enters the doors of our northern schools. Nowhere in Canada is the need to devise ways of treating children as individuals greater than in the schools in which you serve.

Research in psychology which goes back to the turn of this century has confirmed the generalization that individuals differ in all sorts of ways: they differ in their capacities to learn, in their past growth, and at the points at which growth is now ready to occur. We have known for years that each individual grows from where he is, not from some independently determined starting point held in common with others. Yet in spite of all that we know about individual differences, and how pupils learn, we have continued to treat children as if they were pretty much all alike.

Do you remember the story of the cruel robber, Procustes, in Greek mythology? When travellers sought his house for shelter, Procustes placed his guests on a bed, and then made them fit. Short men were stretched to the proper size, while tall men were shortened by having their legs chopped off. Procustes shaped both short and tall until they were equally long -- and equally dead.

This is precisely what the traditional graded school has attempted to do. We have tried to make all pupils fit the same

"educational beds", called "grades" in our school system. This point of view is well summarized by Goodlad and Anderson:

> Certain time-honored practices of pupil classification, while perhaps not lethal, trap school-age travellers in much the same fashion as Procustes' bed trapped the unwary. These practices are concomitants of our graded system of school organization. First, a certain amount of progress is held to be standard for a year's work. Then, the content of the work is laid out within the grade, to be "covered" and, to a degree, "mastered". The slow are pulled and stretched to fit the grade. Sometimes, because their God-given limbs lack enough elasticity, they are "nonpromoted" -- left behind, where presumably another year of stretching will do the trick. The quick are compressed and contracted to fit the grade. In time, they learn to adapt to a pace that is slower than their natural one.[1]

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[1]John I. Goodlad and Robert H. Anderson, The Nongraded Elementary School (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1959), p. 1.

It must be admitted that our Procustean attempts to make all children fit the graded structure have not been too successful. This lock-step grade system is geared to the needs and the ability of the average child, and by its very nature works against the full development of the child who is either above or below the average.

What to do with the slow-learning pupil in the grade system is a question for which there seems to be only wrong answers. If a child is promoted to the next grade before he has mastered the essential skills, he will not succeed in the advanced school work because he lacks the background necessary for the acquisition of new skills. On the other hand, if he is not promoted, he has to repeat material that is no longer of interest to him, he has to repeat some material that

he has already mastered, and he is labelled by himself and his classmates as a "failure". Nonpromotion or "failure" is based on the assumption that by repetition the pupil will learn during the second year what he should have learned during the first. As a matter of fact, however, research studies have shown rather conclusively that students repeating a grade achieve no better, and frequently not as well.[2]

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[2]Walter H. Worth, "Promotion Vs. Nonpromotion: The Edmonton Study", The Alberta Journal of Educational Research, V(September, 1959), p. 201.

The decision about acceleration or double promotion for the bright child is no less difficult. If he is not accelerated, he is likely to become disinterested. He is not challenged as he should be, he develops sloppy work habits, he becomes a candidate for mediocrity. On the other hand, if he skips a grade, he has not learned some of the things which he needs to know if he is to make maximum progress in the new work which he will meet.

Palmer Frank W. Thomas is not far from the truth in his analysis of the difficulties inherent in the grade system.

> With such variations as these to be found in the average classroom, it is of course unwise and unfair to demand the same results within a given length of time from all the pupils of the group. The relative simplicity, however, of giving a single assignment to an entire class, the apparent economic and administrative necessity of maintaining fairly large classes for each teacher, the reluctance of many teachers to experiment with innovations which seem to require more extended planning, and the seductively businesslike

> precision which seems to pervade a sharply graded school system, have all combined to preserve the dillusion that all pupils in a given grade are capable of uniform achievement, with a more vicious fallacy that the teacher is impartially treating them all alike by demanding the same daily tasks of all. As a matter of fact, a uniform requirement means only half work for part of the class, and impossible effort for another part. Thus the teacher who tries to strike a fair average in the assignment is really unfair to the brighter pupils by depriving them of any challenge to capacity effort, and equally unfair to the slow pupils by depriving them of any opportunity for genuine mastery, and corresponding educational growth. Some teachers, realizing the plight of the latter group, direct their main teaching efforts at the slow pupils, and justify their course by declaring that the bright ones will learn anyhow. Others, with equal logic but less compassion, allow the stronger pupils to absorb the chief attention and set the pace, on the theory that those who cannot meet such a standard should drop back into a grade where they can do the work. In reality none of these three plans is fair or democratic, in the sense of granting to all pupils equal opportunities for the best educational progress of which they are individually capable.[3]

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[3]Edson School Division Principals' Association, Teacher's Guide To The Primary Program (Edson Alberta: mimeographed), p. 1. Citing Palmer Frank W. Thomas.

What are the alternatives to the graded school structure and many of the practices that inevitably accompany it? One possible answer to this question is discernible in the growing number of school systems in the United States and Canada which have eliminated grades as such in favor of an organization based upon the theory of continuous progress. The continuous progress plan is not a different method of teaching. Rather, it is an administrative arrangement which makes it possible to provide better for all kinds of children -- the slow learners, the slow starters, the average, and the bright.

The Nongraded Organization

School systems which have adopted the organization of the nongraded elementary school would subscribe to these four fundamental principles:

1. Each child is unique, and has his own rate and pattern of physical, mental, social, and emotional growth.
2. Growth is continuous.
3. A feeling of success and a lack of the inhibiting fear of failure are essential for normal growth.
4. Children face certain common developmental tasks, which should be worked at when they reach the appropriate maturity levels.[4]

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[4]Appleton Public Schools, Continuous Progress Plan (Appleton, Wisconsin: Elementary Department, 1958), p. 1.

The nongraded school is an administrative measure used in the teaching of reading (and often arithmetic and spelling). The main features of this organization are illustrated in Figure 1. Note that the traditional grades have been eliminated, to be replaced by broad divisions, usually called the Primary Division, and the Intermediate Division. Most school systems adopting this form of organization have started with the Primary Division, later extending the plan to include the Intermediate Division.

TRADITIONAL	NONGRADED
Grade 1	Primary Division
Grade 2	
Grade 3	
Grade 4	Intermediate Division
Grade 5	
Grade 6	

FIGURE 1

FORMS OF ORGANIZATION

Providing for Individual Differences

Figure 2 shows the nongraded plan in operation. The Primary Division has been used for purposes of illustration, with specific reference to the reading program.

The entire reading program of grades 1, 2, and 3 is organized into "levels" or units of work. Learning to read takes place in an orderly way. It is a step by step process. Each step depends upon what has gone before. A child may take these steps slowly or quickly, depending upon his own pattern of growth. Each child travels the same route, but the pace or rate of travel is his own. We can appreciate each child for what he is and what he can do.

Does this plan result in a lowering of standards? Those who favor the nongraded school claim that standards are improved. The

child moves to a higher level or to the next unit only after he has succeeded on an achievement test for his current level. Any child not meeting an adequate standard is given specific remedial instruction at this particular stage of growth. Readers may be interested in knowing how this aspect of the plan has worked in Saskatchewan in the Kindersley School Unit. [5]

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[5] Joan Lyngseth, "Kindersley Unit Tailors Its Teaching To Individual Needs", School Progress, XXVIII (October-November, 1959), p. 38.

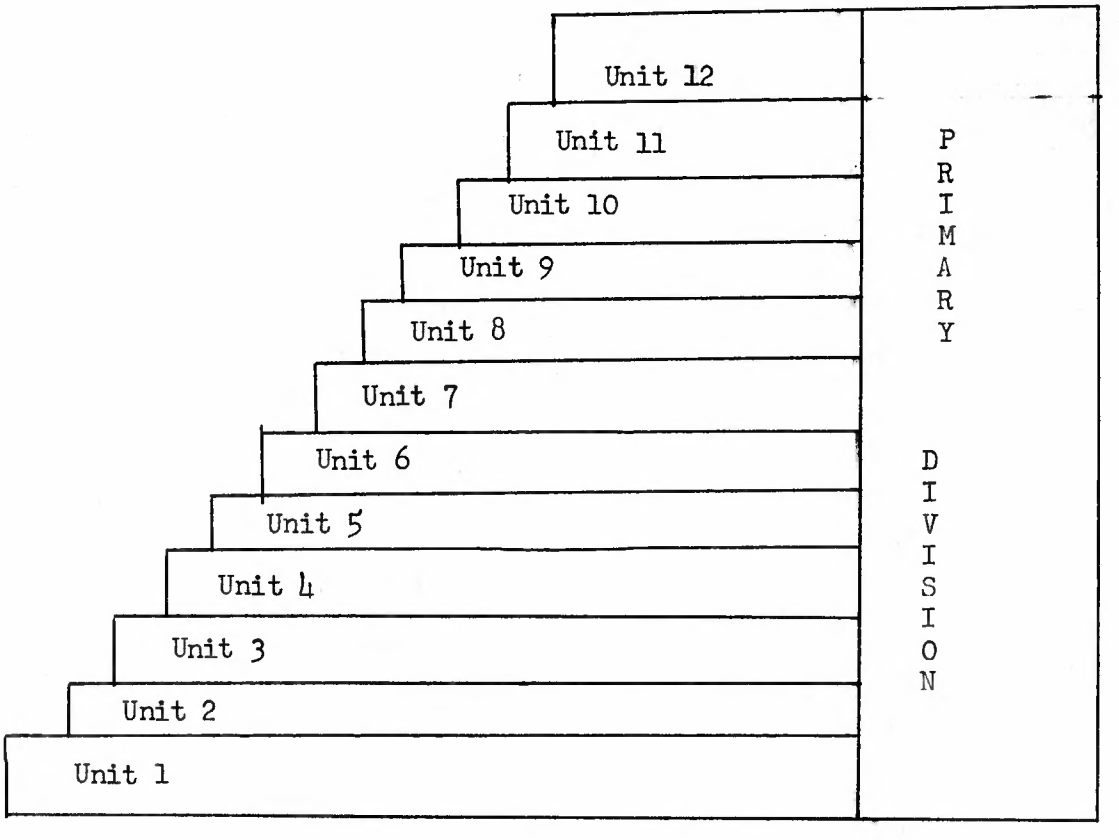

FIGURE 2

LEVELS OF PROGRESS

Figure 3 below shows how the nongraded school eliminates "failure" and "skipping". It has been found through experience that a teacher can manage at least three groups in her classroom. Each group moves from unit to unit at a different rate. The advanced group, by completing six units of work each year, could complete the work in the primary division in two years. At four units of work per year, the average group would complete the primary division in three years. It is possible that the least advanced group might only complete three units per year, thus taking four years to complete the program.

At the end of the school year, each child ends his work at the unit that he has reached. He returns to this unit upon his return in September. This is one of the main strengths of the non-graded plan -- no "failing", no "skipping", just a sensible continuation of progress.

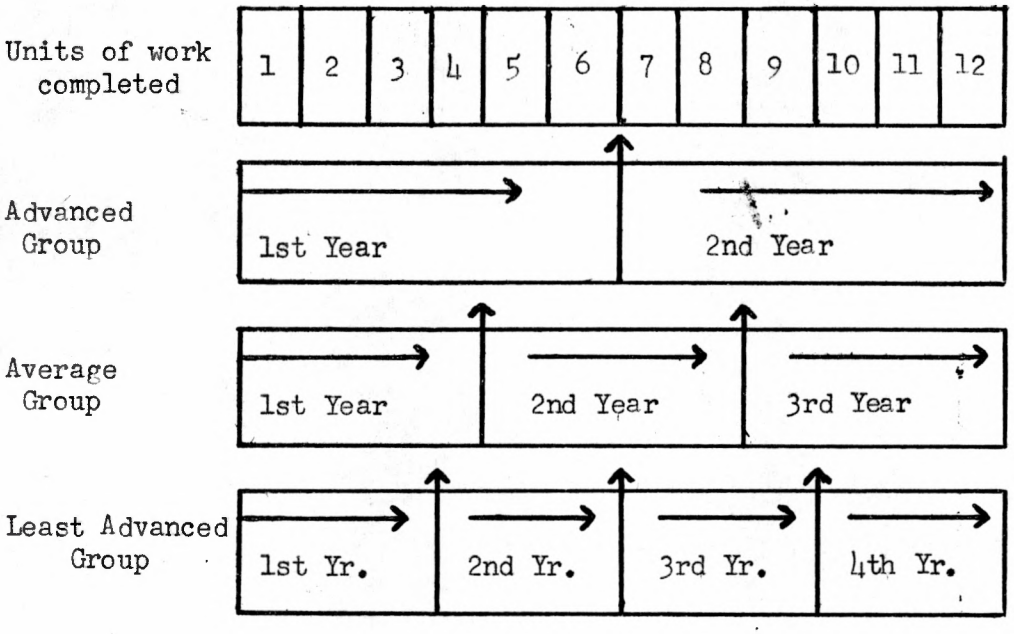

FIGURE 3

DIFFERING RATES OF PROGRESS

There have been some objections from some people (including teachers) at the elimination of "failure". "Failure is one of the facts of life, "they say, "and children must learn to face and to accept failure when it comes."

Most of us would agree that we must learn to accept failure in this life, but we do not regard as a failure something that is beyond the realm of possibility. For example, we have not failed as high jumpers because we have not been able to clear the bar at six feet. Now, if a pupil works to the best of his ability, expends his best efforts consistently and still does not come up to the average for his age and grade, has he failed? Obviously not. Failing a pupil under this standard is as absurd as to tell a child on his ninth birthday that he cannot be nine because he is not as tall or heavy as the other nine-year olds in the neighborhood.

The Main Differences in Structure

It would be well at this point to summarize the main ideas that have been presented in the foregoing discussion. Both the graded and the nongraded school have been described. These two forms of organization are now compared in brief summary fashion.

TABLE I

DIFFERENCES IN STRUCTURE

Graded Structure	Nongraded Structure
1. It is assumed that all children of the same chronological age will develop to the same extent in a given period of time.	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 growth.
2. Inadequate progress made up by repeating the work of a given grade: grade failure the ultimate penalty for slow progress.	2. Slow progress provided for by permitting longer time to do given blocks of work: no repetitions but recognition of basic differences in learning rate.
3. Bright children are not challenged as they need to be. Teachers attempt to avoid moving to the domain of the teacher above.	3. Bright children are encouraged to move ahead regardless of the grade level of the work; no fear of encroaching on the work of the next teacher.
4. Fixed standards of achievement within a set time put pressures upon teachers and children which cause emotional tensions and inhibit learning.	4. Elimination of pressures produces a relaxed learning situation conducive to good mental health.
5. A decision as to grade placement must be made after each ten months.	5. Evaluation of growth is continuous -- there is no particular day of decision. Individual performance is constantly checked and recorded.
6. It is not based upon the way children grow and develop.	6. Emphasizes the need and helps to bring about a greater recognition of the importance of individual differences in children.
7. Creates behavior problems because the slow-maturing become frustrated and the gifted and talented remain unchallenged.	7. Helps to eliminate behavior problems.

8. Parents of slow and fast learners are unhappy.	8. Parents of slow and fast learners are happy because, as they say, "At last, something is being done for my child."
9. Many children are expected to succeed at impossible tasks.	9. Every child has an opportunity for success and achievement.
10. Grade teachers develop a number of routines; it is easy "to get into a rut", assuming that because lessons are taught, pupils will learn.	10. Teachers are challenged as they never were before. Although the teaching is more demanding, it is much more satisfying.

The Establishment of a Nongraded School

What is the best way to move toward the organization of the nongraded school? The findings of a questionnaire study conducted by Goodlad and Anderson in 1957 suggest some fruitful lines of approach.[6]

[6]Goodlad and Anderson, op. cit., pp. 170 - 189.

Thirty-five school systems with nongraded plans in operation were asked to answer these questions:

1. What contributed most to the successful development of the program?
2. What were the most difficult blocks or problems to overcome?
3. What advice would you give to other school systems contemplating the introduction of the nongraded plan?

The majority of explanations for the successful development of the program fell into either of two major categories:

(1) that teachers engaged in serious and continued study of the plans before and after they were adopted,

(2) that parents' understanding of the plans was so crucially important that various devices for enabling parents to study and to learn about the plans were employed.

The preponderance of the problems or difficulties reported by the responding school systems were related to the limited enthusiasm of teachers, rather than parents. The replies afforded rather convincing evidence that the teaching staff is the key to success in any venture of this kind.

The replies to the third question substantiated the crucial position of the teaching staff. Here the underlying theme was that an adequately informed staff is the key to obtaining parental consent and understanding. Another recurring suggestion was that a nongraded plan cannot, or should not, be rushed into being.

Appraisal of Nongraded Schools

What is the evidence regarding the effectiveness of the nongraded school? At the outset it must be admitted that there is a paucity of empirical research in this area. This is not to say that there is no evidence in this area, but rather to suggest that the nongraded school offers unlimited possibilities as a fertile field for useful and needed research.

One study in Calgary attempted to compare the academic achievement of pupils from graded and nongraded schools in certain subject fields. [7]

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[7] E. Gillespie, Unpublished Master of Education Thesis, University of Alberta, Edmonton, 1958.

In this particular study no significant difference in achievement was found. On the other hand, a similar kind of study undertaken in the Van Dyke Public Schools in Michigan revealed that the children from the nongraded school showed superior achievement in reading. [8]

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[8]Marjorie Carlson and Helen Roche, The Van Dyke Level System (Van Dyke, Michigan: Van Dyke Public School System, mimeographed brochure.)

This question of relative effectiveness is, of course, important. Conclusive evidence is still not available. However, proponents of the nongraded school are heartened by the existing evidence which indicates that the nongraded school secures results at least as good as the traditional graded school so far as subject-matter achievement is concerned, and that they appear to achieve additional results not ordinarily associated with the lock-step grade system. Some of these concomitant results are difficult to measure. How can one measure contentment of parents, or the lack of pressure of unreasonable competition in the life of a little child? How can one measure the spirit of enthusiasm, of service on the part of a teaching staff, because they are freed from so much frustration in not being able to meet the needs of all the children in their classrooms?

Concluding Statement

The nongraded elementary school is beginning to gain increased recognition in the United States and Canada. Many are asking, "May we see this new thing which has come to pass?". Others are saying, "This is nothing new. It is just a rebirth of the old rural school that our fathers attended."

In many respects this interest in the nongraded school is reminiscent of the three blind men who come to "see" the elephant, and each "saw" what he wanted "to see". Each failed to envision the whole, but did visualize what his experience enabled him to recognize. It has been the purpose of this article to try to enable the reader to see the whole elephant. The animal is not full-grown yet, nevertheless one may begin to see its definite shape as it approaches maturity.

The concluding paragraphs in The Nongraded Elementary School seem appropriate.

> It has become apparent that the nongraded elementary school is no panacea. Such a school makes the conduct of education no easier. But the process of nongrading lays bare long-standing educational problems. There is seen to be a compatibility between the nongraded structure and continuous pupil progress, longitudinal curriculum development, and integrated learning. Having glimpsed the nature of this compatibility, educators must then face up to the arduous process of bringing it to life.
>
> The nongraded school is not for those who would stop with a little organizational reshuffling. It is for those educators who would make use of present-day insights into individual differences, curriculum, and theories of personality, and who would commit themselves to a comprehensive revision of elementary education. [9]

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[9] Goodlad and Anderson, op. cit., p. 216.

Some Questions For Discussion

Grouping

1. How should a pupil's placement in the accelerated, average or decelerated group be determined?
   (a) What factors should be considered?
   (b) Which factor(s) should be considered as most important?
2. Would it be possible to move from one group to another?
3. How much acceleration is desirable?

Testing Program

1. What kind of a testing program would be necessary?
2. What specific tests are given, and when?
3. Who administers these tests?
4. Who is responsible for the keeping of records?

Teachers

1. Should teachers move through the whole Division with their pupils, rather than teaching only the work of a certain "grade" level?
2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of an extended period of pupil-teacher association?
3. How could teachers best be oriented to this form of organization?
4. Does the Division System have any special implications for teacher training?

Curriculum

1. In what ways could the program of the advanced group be enriched?
2. Who should plan the actual units of work?
3. What special teaching aids might be needed for remedial teaching and teaching the slow learners?

Miscellaneous

1. Would the Division System involve any changes in methods of reporting pupil progress to parents?
2. What do you consider to be the chief advantage of the Division System?
3. What problems do you foresee in adopting this form of organization?

4. Where is the best place to begin the Division System? Why?

5. How long a preparatory period would be needed before attempting to implement this form of organization?