Inside the One Room Schoolhouse:
A Look at Nongraded Classrooms From the Inside Out

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ABSTRACT

This article is a qualitative examination of the nongraded approach to schooling. Stakeholder feedback was collected, analyzed, classified, and reported. Perceptions and concerns of stakeholders with respect to the nongraded educational model are reported.

As we enter the twenty-first century, many of our schools seem to operate in a time warp, locked into an archaic system of organization, instruction, and assessment (Deming, 1993; Rader, 1998). The world and society in which children live is changing with astronomical speed while educational ideas and methods remain frozen in familiarity and unchanging routine. Many of our schools are still in the lockstep pattern that has prevailed in our schools for many decades. Students are often made to sit quietly each day in rows of neatly aligned desks facing the front of the room while the teachers impart their wisdom to less than attentive students. Administrators and teachers consistently wonder why they are faced with students who have so many discipline problems. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) identifies the source of such discipline problems and lists alternatives in which students are encouraged to explore, experiment, solve problems, and engage in meaningful learning.

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) identifies the critical aspect of meaningful student performance in the classroom as "flow." Flow is the merger of art, spirit, and work within the context of instructional experiences. Flow occurs when the challenges of the classroom match the skills of the learners. Under this condition students are at their most productive and are growing in intellectual complexity. Shanker (1990) explains that our traditional model of schooling is opposite of the idea that students learn better actively, at different rates, and in different ways. Gough (1990) further points out that as education moved through the 1980s where the focus was on more of everything (homework, days in school, testing, required courses, etc.) to the 1990s, the focus changed to restructuring our schools. This move toward educational reform has its roots in the "education decade" (Goodlad, 1970), and has been especially evident during the past 15 years. During the mid-1950s, professional educators realized that the American School System, which was very subject centered, must begin to change to place the student at its center (Rollins, 1968). Numerous professionals (Blackbourn, Hanshaw, Hamby, & Beck, 1997; Blackbourn, Rose, Dye, & Edmundson, 1996; Deming, 1987; Goodlad, 1984; Glasser 1990, 1991; Senge, 1990) have supported this contention and offered a variety of suggestions for achieving this end.

For instructional purposes, children must be viewed as unique individuals with different patterns of growth and learning abilities (Gutierrez & Slavin, 1992). Unfortunately, our present system of education still attempts to lock all students into inflexible learning environments (Shanker, 1990). In our attempts to bring about change and restructure our educational system, we have overlooked the need for restructuring the whole system in lieu of trying to change those small parts which effect test scores and discipline (Rubenstein, 1993).

According to Lolli (1993), this need for change has been precipitated due to societal changes and expectations. Our current society and the extent of our technology has resulted in general expectations for all to succeed within educational environments. However, this expectation does not extend to all students learning material at exactly the same rate or progress through the grades at the same speed. America's traditional model of education, with its inflexibility, limitations, and rigid, confining structure does not enable the vast majority of students to be adequately educated (Shanker, 1990).

As we enter the twenty-first century, the need for change becomes apparent when trying to meet the needs of our diverse population. Lolli (1993) stated, "It is time for

organize the structure for all children." One new structure can be reminiscent of the one room schoolhouse which provided for a multiage approach to education. While the graded school system has been criticized for ignoring differences in individual learners, Goodlad (1996) found that nongrading or multiage grouping enhanced the match of "goodness of fit" between materials and individual learners. The American Association of School Administrators (1992) defined the nongraded school as one in which students are allowed to progress from one skill level or concept to the next whenever they are ready. Children do not pass or fail individual grades, but rather they progress through the grades at their own individual rate. Letter grades are also replaces with more authentic forms of assessment such as portfolios, videos, and checklists. Goodlad (1996) offers his definition of the nongraded school:

The non-graded school is designed to implement a theory of continuous pupil progress. Since the differences among children are great and since these differences cannot be substantially modified, school structure must facilitate the continuous educational progress of each pupil. Some pupils, therefore, will require a longer period of time than others for achieving certain learning and attaining certain developmental levels. These ungraded or multiage programs do not easily fit into traditional organizational structures, but rather reflect the way children develop and learn (Grant, 1993; Kotulak, 1996). Such programs more adequately accommodate the diverse student population which is now present in our schools.

The absence of paper and pencil assessment methods is a major feature of the ungraded approach. Individual benchmarks are set and videos are taken of learning in progress. Portfolios are also an integral part of authentic assessment, although many teachers seem uncomfortable with portfolios and simply kept work folders. Authentic assessment is a major factor in making the multiage, nongraded system work.

Centers and thematic units are often used as the primary means of instruction. Such classrooms tend to rely heavily on journaling by the individual students. Teachers in the multiage, nongraded classroom report that the primary focus is to keep student attention, and this rarely seems to be a problem. Such a statement is consistent with Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) notions about "flow."

The rationales for nongrading, according to Smith (1968) and Guitierrez and Slavin (1992), are:

1. An positive alternative to retention and social promotion
2. A legitimate alternative to the stigmatizing, traditional forms of ability grouping
3. Elimination of grade labels (particularly for students whose grade placement is inconsistent with their age)
4. The promotion of individual instruction
5. The encouragement of continuous, steady progress in the individual child
6. A focus on individual needs rather than grade-level content
7. A reduction in student discipline problems

This study examined nongraded elementary classrooms from the perspective of the principals, teachers, and parents involved. The findings reported include a description

of locations, and information concerning various aspects of the non-graded multiage programs currently in place in elementary schools selected for this study. The data in this study were collected and transcribed from field notes gathered from on-site observations, structured and unstructured interviews.

The information collected indicated that different schools set up and operated nongraded, multiage classes in different ways. These classrooms were operated according to the philosophy of the teachers in charge of the classes and of the principal in each school. Each class among and within the schools was somewhat different from the next (not unlike traditional classrooms). Responses indicated that students in multiage classes seemed to be most successful when the teachers did not feel threatened and were given the freedom to structure and operate the classes to ensure optimum learning for all students. This finding was consistent with the positions of Deming (1993) and Glasser (1990).

Most parents were interested in this instructional approach. There was a negative side to this, however. Some parents viewed the selection process as a social rather than an academic issue. Among those concerns voiced by parents were the following:

1. Mixing the genders - The majority of parents of male students supported multiage classrooms while the most parents of females tended to want classrooms containing students of similar age. Administrators attributed this to the fact that parents of the females did not like the idea of younger girls being in the room all the time with older males.

2. Math - Some parents were concerned that math did not seem to be adequately addressed in the nongraded setting. Administrators interviewed stated that math was the sole content area not to be solely addressed in the nongraded classes. The rationale was to insure that all grade level objectives were being met. Both teachers and administrators were examining various arrangements within the multiage classrooms to address math in a manner similar to other subjects.

3. Brothers and sisters - Brothers and sisters in the same room was a concern of all parents because of sibling history of negative interactions at home.. According to the results of teacher and administrator interviews, siblings tended to help each other with their homework and classwork. The need for constant discipline in general was diminished in the nongraded setting because the older children tend to become role models for their younger siblings and other students.

4. Grades - A major concern of parents was the elimination of letter grades. Parents were given a report card, if requested, but the letter grade would only be the teacher's opinion because of the use of authentic assessment rather than traditional examinations. Parents are kept informed concerning student progress via newsletters, videos of learning activities, or anecdotal reports every 41/2 weeks. Conferences and end of year reports were also used. To begin the year, meetings to inform the parents of school expectations were held.

One of the advantages of the nongraded approach over traditional classrooms was the strong positive relationship developed and maintained with the parents, teachers, and administrators. This opinion was voiced by everyone interviewed, teachers, principals,

and parents. Many teachers emphasized how important it was to keep in contact with parents. The majority reported a closeness with parents that they never had before. This strong cooperative relationship with parents was felt by all to be the key to the success of nongraded multiage classes.

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