

## THE NONGRADED CONTINUUM

When Goodlad and Anderson first published "The Nongraded Elementary School" in 1959, it provided the impetus for schools to examine their own practices in meeting the needs of individuals. The industrial model of school delivery which had operated up to that time was forever then going to be called to question. The only variable from that point was not whether all schools would someday be organized in nongraded fashion, but how long it would take to effect the change.

The growth of multiage and nongraded practices in Australia, Canada, the USA and other parts of the world bears testament to this fact. Changes such as the outcomes approach in Australia and continuous progress in the US, enhance and complement nongraded practices perfectly.

Along with the growth in multiage grouping as a paradigm for organizing classrooms and schools has come a greater understanding of the practicalities and the philosophy which support multiageing. This enhanced understanding has resulted in the realization that there is no one way to organize classrooms in nongraded fashion, and that there is in fact a continuum of nongradedness. Indeed within multiage schools, the degree of "multi-agedness" can vary considerably.

This article is an attempt to define teaching practices and classroom organization along a continuum of nongradedness, incorporating a description of the salient differences amongst the paradigms. But first, let's be a bit retrograde and look at the way graded schools have traditionally been organized.

### **Graded Settings**

#### **Assumptions and Beliefs**

The origin of the graded school lay in the industrial revolution, whereby schools were modelled on the factory. I will not delve into the characteristics here as we should all be pretty conversant with the way graded schools operate, for most of us have experienced them and they are still around. Those wishing to read further on the industrial model of schooling and its origins should check out "Changing Schools" by Mike Middleton and Jennifer Hill.

The basic assumption of the graded school is that children can be “batch processed,” that all children can be taught the same thing in the same way at the same time. Children of like age are grouped together assuming they all have the same needs. As well, it is assumed that all children have the same speed of learning; that they can all learn to read, write, calculate etc at the same rate. Middleton and Hill point out that this is highly unlikely and use the example of obtaining a driver’s licence to exemplify that we learn at different rates. Some of us take ten lessons, some twenty lessons, and some even more before we master the skills needed to drive a car and thus obtain a licence. The outcome is clearly defined; the variable is how long it takes to achieve it. And so it is with schooling. The notion that all children can learn the same amount after 12 years of schooling is clearly a nonsense.

The graded system was designed to educate large numbers of children with reasonable efficiency, and as economically as possible. Streaming is the worst case scenario arising out of graded practices, for children in large streamed schools were grouped within classes according to their ability and achievement. Such a system is untenable these days where schools focus on social justice and equity issues in the classroom. Class balance around ability, behaviour, gender and special needs is essential (see “Brer Rabbit in the Classroom” in *Free To Learn* Vol. 4 No. 2.)

Clearly, graded settings were designed to bring education to the masses with organizational demands the driving force rather than the educational needs of individuals. A stringent examination system was implemented to weed out those who lacked aptitude for schooling or whose parents could not afford to keep children at school.

### **Advantages**

The chief advantage of graded approaches was that education could be brought to the masses using this system, and children could be ‘batch processed’, whether they learnt or not. Graded curriculum was organized on the assumption that children could be taught the same time at the same time within the same time limitations. There may have been a time and place for this type of system but it no longer exists.

### **Disadvantages**

The key failure of graded settings is that they do not provide for the needs of all individuals. This was not an issue when children could be exited as a result of

examination failure. This capacity to highlight and reinforce children's failings is a major concern today when we want all children to complete 12 years of schooling, since for this to occur schools need to identify students' strengths and provide positive reinforcement and encouragement when they succeed.

The major disadvantage of graded settings is that it is too easy for the teacher to teach the class and fail to cater for individual differences within the class. The greatest impeding factor within the graded setting itself is the over-reliance on whole of class instruction. While there is a place for whole of class lessons, they generally fail to cater for the full range of abilities in the class. Alternative grouping structures are more effective in achieving this. The fact that graded settings remain the dominant paradigm, especially in large schools, seriously impacts on our thinking about children and the way they develop.

### **Composite (Combined) Classes**

Composite classes need examination in this discussion for they too are a relic of the graded system, but still have a profound influence on today's classrooms. Basically a composite class is formed in a graded school when there are insufficient student numbers to make up whole classes of like-aged students. They are formed for administrative convenience, to be disbanded at the end of the school year when it is intended that children slot back into mainstream classes. Teachers of composite classes were once required to maintain the integrity of the graded curriculum so this slotting back would be easier for children. In actual fact these days, few composite classes still operate this way, though there is still a degree of rancour, particularly from parents, surrounding the placement of children in composite classes.

Interestingly there is systemic support for the notion of undesirability of composite classes. In Queensland, composite classes are seen as more difficult to teach to the extent that they should have no more than 25 children under any circumstances, particularly in years 4 to 10 where the accepted maximum single year level class size is 30. In New South Wales, composite classes were such an issue that in 1996, the then Minister for Education, John Acquilina ordered a review of composite classes, equating the practice with multiage grouping.

### **Assumptions and Beliefs**

Some interesting practices arose in graded schools when composite classes became necessary. To make the job easier for the teacher, all the more "independent" children may have been placed in the composite class, or the

bright children from the lower year level with the slower children from the upper year level. Sometimes too, with the very best of intentions, the class may have been formed with lower numbers but with all the slow learners in the class. This notion of de facto streaming ignores any notion of social justice or balanced class organization.

The real issue in classrooms today is not the number of year levels that the teacher is required to teach, but the number of children that the teacher teaches. It is my contention that it is more effective to properly teach say 20 children in three or four year levels than it is to teach 30 children of one year level.

### **Advantages**

The best that can be said for composite classes in the traditional setting was that they did get around the problem of student numbers and class formation. Some children may have benefited from the improved student:teacher ratio, and the job may have been easier for the teacher. Other classes and teachers however would have shouldered a heavier load with the resultant imbalance across all classes. Composite classes still operate in many graded schools but today they do allow the teacher to teach to ability rather than year level content

### **Disadvantages**

Their main disadvantage is that composite classes have been unpopular with parents and some teachers, and misunderstood by bureaucrats and politicians. The traditional need to maintain curriculum integrity for when children return to the graded setting no doubt added to the teacher's workload.

### **Looping**

#### **Assumptions and Beliefs**

Looping is a variation of the graded setting whereby the teacher works with a class of children for a year then continues with the same group into a second or third year. The possibility exists to extend beyond a three year loop even. Looping picks up on one of the key benefits of multiage organization, namely the benefit of greater continuity with the same teacher. Over the years I have had many teachers working within both graded and multiage settings who have asked to take their existing class on for a second year. The normal forming, storming, norming, performing pattern exists in any classroom, and by the latter half of the year the class is usually performing. This is the source of the teacher's

request, as they recognize the success of their efforts to have their class 'gel', and desire to keep this going into the second year.

### **Advantages**

There are several advantages to looping. Greater continuity is achieved and this translates into greater productivity as the class and the teacher commence the new school year knowing each other. The teacher can deliver an effective program based on her knowledge of the children and their needs and interests right from the start. Routines established in the first year continue.

The teacher is not locked into the same year level year after year with looping, so there exists the chance to experience the variety of another year level. One of the greatest travesties of the administration of graded settings is to leave the teacher on the same year level year after year after year.

In terms of teacher accountability, looping has the potential to fit nicely with the testing regime which is currently the political flavour of the western world. What better way than to have the teacher teach the class for two years then measure the outcomes using a systemic test? The potential exists to link the outcomes of the test with the teacher's performance after two years with the same group of children. There is less opportunity to apportion the blame for poor results elsewhere, though it could also mean accepting the accolades for good performance as well.

Looping is a useful strategy for those who are reluctant to go all the way and accept a multiage class. As an interim measure for those heading down the nongraded pathway looping deserves full support.

### **Disadvantages**

The major disadvantage of looping is that there is no significant change in the social makeup of the class group when the whole group continues from one year to the next. It is the same teacher with the same group of children and as such the group eventually becomes stale socially. A healthy organization needs a social remix occasionally to remain robust and allow the opportunity to develop relationships.

As a long term method of organizing classrooms the practice is only marginally more beneficial than a graded setting, and is at best a soft option for achieving greater continuity of class program.

## Multiage Classes

### **Assumptions and Beliefs**

Multiage classes are built on the notion that all children develop differently and as such, differentiation of instruction needs to be provided in the classroom. Children's needs are met by differentiated programming and by employing a variety of grouping structures in the classroom (see "How children are taught in a multiage class" in *Free To Learn* Vol. 6 No. 1.) Whilst this differentiation can be provided in any class setting, it is more likely to occur in a multiage setting where teachers employ a needs based approach.

The key feature is that it is highly desirable, both educationally and socially, to have heterogeneous ages grouped in the one classroom.

### **Advantages**

The main advantage of multiageing is the greater continuity which can be achieved when the class teacher, or a team of teachers, takes responsibility for the class for two or more years. The strength of relationships which develop provides a significant foundation on which to build an educational program. I have discussed the widespread benefits of continuity previously (see "Continuity and the multiage group" in *Free To Learn* Vol. 3 No. 1.)

The improved socialization and behaviour of children who have experienced multiage organization is now well documented, and the research is beginning to show the academic benefits as well. Anderson and Pavan provide a good rundown on the results of research including the social and academic benefits of multiage in their book: *Nongradedness: Helping it to Happen*.

While much more research is sorely needed, especially in Australia, it is my contention that the links between multiage and improved outcomes will be proven in time through the research which is carried out. As in the case where research eventually showed the links between smoking and lung cancer, the research into the benefits of multiage practices will eventually be irrefutable.

### **Disadvantages**

The greatest disadvantage of multiageing is the fact that it is change incarnate. Schools need to alter the paradigm which has existed since the industrial

revolution; there will always be educational Luddites who will actively resist the change, indeed sometimes undermining the change. The need exists to maintain patience in the face of this resistance.

The parent community needs to be well educated into what multiage is and how it works in the classroom. While I have encountered many pockets of parental resistance to this change over the years, for the most part, parents can see that the change is good for children, though they cannot always understand how it is implemented in the classroom.

The need to educate teachers is of paramount importance. As with all change there will be those who adopt it logically and readily, those who are pragmatically skeptical, and those who will resist and even obstruct at every turn. My advice is, as with all change, to work with the strength, for the others will fall in behind as the mystique is taken out of the equation. Teacher support is by far the most important weapon in combating parental resistance, for there still exists a high level of trust between the majority of parents and teachers on the individual level.

Systemic changes are needed as well, and it helps if education systems give more than tacit support. The graded, norm-based nature of systemic testing for example does little to foster a developmental view of children's learning. Organizationally, much of what we deal with on a day to day basis still has a year level attached to it. Syllabuses and resources still have year levels assigned to them. While we are moving to a more kid-friendly means of assessing outcomes in different levels, systemically the outcome levels are still equated with year levels. It will take some years for the data to show it, but eventually the folly of this will become evident.

Finally, the greatest hindrance to change is the lack of inspired leadership both in schools and in educational hierarchies. Principals for the last decade have been distracted by the demands of economic rationalism, the legacy of which will remain with us for many years yet. We have taken our eye off the ball and been distracted by the managerial demands imposed on schools, otherwise more principals would be supporting multiage organization in the interests of their students. Educational bureaucracies are no longer run by educators, and their lack of understanding seriously impedes the rate of innovation, slow as it is even at the best of times.

## **Staging**

### **Assumptions and Beliefs**

The practice of staging has arisen from the implementation of multiage grouping coupled with a greater understanding of the nongraded philosophy. While multiage groups can have an array of different age ranges and combinations, staging is more scripted around the organization of year levels.

In some schools, the stages are identified around year levels eg.

|                           |    |                 |
|---------------------------|----|-----------------|
| Stage 1 = Year 1 and 2    | or | Year 1, 2 and 3 |
| Stage 2 = Year 3 and 4    | or | Year 4 and 5    |
| Stage 3 = Year 5, 6 and 7 | or | Year 6 and 7    |

There is a risk with both the alternatives above that seven horizontal grades will translate into three horizontal grades, albeit with greater continuity occurring. A better pattern recognizes the need for cusps at the transition points:

|                           |    |                             |
|---------------------------|----|-----------------------------|
| Stage 1 = Year 1, 2 and 3 | or | 5, 6, 7 and 8 year olds     |
| Stage 2 = Year 3, 4 and 5 | or | 8, 9, and 10 year olds      |
| Stage 3 = Year 5, 6 and 7 | or | 10, 11, 12 and 13 year olds |

This latter pattern is enhanced when it is recognized that children do not have to wait until the end of a school year before they move from one stage to the next. Rather, the move happens when the child is ready, as demonstrated by their mastery of outcomes for the stage. This needs-based approach is fundamental to nongraded philosophy. Further enhancement occurs when the year level nomenclature is removed entirely and the child is recognized solely by their stage of development.

### **Advantages**

Staging releases children from the shackles of year level labelling entirely. Staging better recognizes the developmental needs of children and is more in tune with those needs. The child's needs become the focus rather than the organizational needs of the school being the focus. While national profiles and syllabus documents are written in levels rather than grades, the way schools translate these into practice will demonstrate the understanding of what staging has to offer.



## **Disadvantages**

All the disadvantages of staging are the same as for multiageing, but to a greater degree. The corollary of this is that greater energy may be needed to bring about the change, though schools which have multiage organization in place will probably find the move into staging less difficult.

The greatest impedance comes from the vestiges of graded schooling which still pervade our educational thinking. The temptation to equate stages with year levels could mean that horizontal structures will persist.

## **Nongraded Classes**

### **Assumptions and Beliefs**

I have yet to see what I regard as a true nongraded school. Many which wear the nongraded label, I have discovered, are really multiage in organization. Some particular philosophies such as is found in Steiner schools, Piagetian schools and Montessori schools are probably closer to true nongraded organization than mainstream schools are. For these alternative schools, year levels are a non-issue. Children progress through the school as they develop cognitively and socially. Child development is the focus which is maintained at all times

### **Advantages and Disadvantages**

The main advantage of a nongraded school is that it adopts a totally needs-based approach. The very name though, nongraded, recognizes that there remains an alternative contrary philosophy, namely gradedness. We will never achieve true educational liberation while there is recognition that gradedness exists, for the vestiges of gradedness will always be there to befuddle pure thinking about child development.

## **Ungraded Approaches**

### **Assumptions and Beliefs**

The situation where gradedness is not even recognized, nay even that there is a word to describe it, sounds like something out of 1984, but it is the only true way to achieve a pure ungraded philosophy. Believe it or not this is actually the case

in some schools, particularly those which deal with the seriously impaired or handicapped. In such settings, the individual's needs are extremely high level and the educational program is tailored entirely to the individual's needs and achievements.

That there is no other way than an ungraded approach is all that is countenanced.

### **Advantages and Disadvantages**

The implementation of true ungradedness probably means the end of schools as we know them. Recognition of children's particular learning needs will probably also result in the recognition that the need may be better met in someplace other than school. The future of schools as we know them will be seriously questioned should this come to pass.

### **Conclusion**

In this article, I have endeavoured to provide a snapshot of the differences between graded and nongraded settings, with some critical comments to boot. The criticisms are intended to be of the system, not the people who work within them. My aim has been to stimulate thinking and questioning about the settings we are presently engaged in with a view to future change. The fact that a continuum has been identified implies that for those wishing to change, the way forward should be a little clearer when the next step along the continuum is a more obvious.

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