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A Plan for Initiating an Ungraded Primary Program

Rodney Wright Miller
Central Washington University

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A PLAN FOR INITIATING AN
UNGRADED PRIMARY PROGRAM

A Research Paper
Presented to
the Graduate Faculty
Central Washington State College

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Education

by
Rodney Wright Miller

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THIS PAPER IS APPROVED AS MEETING THE
PLAN 2 REQUIREMENT FOR THE COMPLETION
OF A RESEARCH PAPER.

Jettye Fern Grant
FOR THE GRADUATE FACULTY

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION AND DEFINITIONS OF TERMS USED

I. INTRODUCTION

In order to provide the proper framework within which to present this study, it is necessary to state briefly the writer's educational philosophy. Knowing this should aid the reader in understanding the reasons for initiating the ungraded primary program.

In a democracy, the public school has the responsibility of educating all children capable of learning. The nature of education varies, of course, depending on the different abilities, interests, and needs of the child. In total, however, it must work to develop fully each individual's capabilities.

Since each person must take a place in society, he should be educated as an individual. Only through this individualized process can the child's abilities and limitations be recognized and he be oriented to his society. The degree to which this is accomplished is the main measure of the success of the educational program.

II. DEFINITIONS OF TERMS USED

Ungraded primary. The ungraded primary is a plan where children beyond kindergarten age and below the fourth grade are grouped in classes, without a grade level designation in which great effort is made to adjust instruction to individual differences (1:68; 9:586). "The ungraded primary

organization is not a method of teaching, but rather an administrative tool, designed to encourage and promote a philosophy of continuous growth" (14:79). For the purpose of this study, "ungraded" and "nongraded" will be synonymous. The writer will use the term "ungraded" wherever possible with the exception of quotations where an author has used the term "nongraded."

Grade. A "grade" is one of the major divisions of the graded school, representing the body of work designated for one school year.

Grade standards. "Grade standards" will be "minimum standards set up by the school for pupils to achieve in order to be promoted" (9:423).

Grouping. "Grouping" will be "the process of classifying pupils for instructional purposes; applied to class groups or intraclass groups" (9:256).

Continuous progress. "Continuous progress" will be "continual progression from one stage to the next in difficulty . . ." (9:420).

CHAPTER II

IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

I. PURPOSE OF THE UNGRADED PRIMARY

With the rapidly increasing population, the developing mobility of that population, and the emphasis on specialization, with these and other changes in our world, schools are besieged with stronger demands for quality education for all children. Research has shown much evidence of the differences found in and between individuals. This same research has further shown that education does not eliminate this range of differences, but rather increases it. The school must function to develop the individual, with his differences, into a participating member of an increasingly complex society.

In their effort to do this, schools are ever-changing, attempting to meet more adequately the needs of each child. Various plans have been designed for this purpose.

One of these plans, the ungraded primary, attempts to satisfy this purpose by eliminating traditional grade divisions. The traditional grades, with their corresponding body of subject matter within each grade, are replaced by learning levels through which the child progresses at his own speed. There are no set requirements he must fulfill by the end of each school year. Instead, the individual, as rapidly as he is capable, moves through a flexible curriculum designed to stimulate him to work to his

capacity. Progress is measured not against rigid standards but rather by the capability and application of the child.

Grouping is an important tool in the ungraded primary plan. Many types of grouping are used as contrasted to the one or two usually associated with the graded system. The basis for grouping is determined primarily by the needs of the individual. This use of grouping is indicative of the purpose behind the ungraded primary organization: to release the child from the lock-step of grade standards and allow him to progress at his best speed.

II. ADVANTAGES TO BE ACHIEVED THROUGH AN UNGRADED TYPE OF ORGANIZATION

Due to its relative newness the ungraded plan of organization does not yet have research findings to support its plausible-sounding claims and theories (10:222). Within the next few years this situation may be rectified as more schools begin the program and evaluate their findings. These findings will probably deal with many of the following purported advantages.

Encourages continuous pupil progress in a single unbroken learning continuum. The continuous progress of each individual pupil is assured. With the absence of grade barriers the emphasis can be placed on taking the child where he is and progressing from that point. The child can be placed in a group in accordance with his capacities, interests, educational needs, and stages of social, physical, and emotional development (5:22). This placement not only ensures recognition of difference between individuals, but within the

individual as well. The child's education can be viewed as a whole rather than segments made up of graded packages of learning (12:212). The curriculum can not be easily divided into definite topics organized by grade level (12:214). The fact that two children are the same chronological age does not guarantee that they are both ready to learn the same concept in a given area at the same time. However, if the child is following a planned sequence of learning at his own rate, there is a much greater chance of his mastering concepts in the sequence. This individual pacing and steady progress should provide more effective learning than that determined by grade standards and hampered by grade barriers. "Individual differences, because they are accepted at face value, become a source of group strength instead of factors that upset the graded apple cart" (12:156).

Eliminates pressures created by promotion requirements. Removal of grade standards with the accompanying necessity for grade promotion or retention can create a healthier emotional climate (5:20). The effects of non-promotion on students have been widely studied. It has been generally concluded" . . . that nonpromotion is not conducive to the development of pupil feelings of satisfaction and well-being" (12:36). Holding a child to certain grade standards can be harmful to the child considerably below those standards and to the child considerably above them. The ungraded plan does away with this necessity for social prestige through promotion. The child's progress is a day to day matter, not something to be determined at the end of the school year.

Provides greater progress for retarded and superior student.

Because of its attention to the individual without regard for grade level

standards, both the retarded student and the superior student are helped to work to capacity at all times.

The ungraded primary school gives the retarded child a better chance to discover his latent possibilities during the period of trial and error when he may seem out of adjustment both with his peer group and with class room routine (5:24).

In addition, the ungraded primary

. . . has the advantage of encouraging the superior child to work to limits of his capacities while at the same time permitting freedom of association with children of about his own age whose social interests are similar (5:27).

Others. The aforementioned advantages are some of the major ones listed by proponents of the ungraded plan of organization. Other advantages often mentioned include better parent-teacher understanding, superior motivation for the child, and greater flexibility in pupil grouping. These advantages, however, will not be treated in detail.

III. RESPONSIBILITY OF THE BUILDING PRINCIPAL IN INITIATING THE PROGRAM

The key person in determining the success or failure of the ungraded program might very well be the principal. He has the major role in initiating and presenting this new program to the teachers and parents.

The responsibility of those entrusted with the administration of a program is, therefore, to so order the elements of total instructional resources that meaningful and appropriate learning may be facilitated (16:145).

In a program with the emphasis on individualized instruction, the "total instructional resources" must be many and varied. The principal is generally responsible for the organization of these resources into an

effective learning environment.

The administrator's first responsibility is to become thoroughly acquainted with the ungraded organization and have a desire to investigate its merits (12:176). He must be completely convinced of the educational value of the ungraded idea and dedicated to its institution in his school. Because this type of school organization is different, some opposition may be encountered. The administrator must be prepared for this.

After the principal has acquainted himself with the program, he must next introduce it to his staff (12:177). Several approaches to this step will be discussed in a later section.

The principal must make certain that he does not become too personally identified with the program. The staff must accept the ungraded program on the basis of its own merit and basic advantages, not on the basis of the principal's prestige or beliefs. It is the principal's task to help acquaint the staff with the ungraded idea, then let them personally explore the worth of the program (12:190).

. . . the greatest difficulty which elementary school principals are experiencing lies in the field of instructional programs--how to improve their quality and how to provide programs for meeting the special and varied needs of children (7:101).

It would seem that the ungraded plan of organization would do much to meet the needs of children and help solve one of the principal's difficult problems. Initiating such a program is his first step in improving the quality of the instructional program.

CHAPTER III

PROBLEMS OF INITIATION

The problems of initiation can be divided into three main areas, those relating to administration, to instruction, and to personnel. The administrator must concern himself with these and make provision for handling them. This chapter will give a brief summary of the major items authorities feel should be definitely considered. No attempt will be made to include all possible problems of initiation.

I. ADMINISTRATIVE PROBLEMS

Overall Plan for Initiating the Program

When instituting any program involving change, the administrator must have a clear idea of the steps to be taken. His plan should include not only specific items but also the overall effect desired. Knowledge of the specific steps necessary and the general result to be obtained will do much to guarantee an effective initiation.

Certain items should be included in any plan for initiating the ungraded primary organization. The following list was recommended by the Appleton, Wisconsin, schools:

1. A superintendent of schools who feels all parts of a child's growth contribute to the learning situation.
2. Industrious and energetic teachers.
3. Principals who work together.
4. An interested and open-minded school board.
5. A community proud of its school with citizens who keep informed and involved in the planning process.
6. A cooperative press (20:161).

If these are present it is the task of the principal to coordinate and develop them to achieve the best possible results. If some of them are missing or weak, he must attempt to correct this.

Once these success factors have been assured, initial steps may be taken to institute the program. Suggestions have been made as to some of the initial steps taken by different schools using the ungraded primary program. Certain of these steps will be treated in more detail in later sections:

1. Develop understanding by teachers and parents first.
2. Move toward the ungraded program beginning with the group of children coming from the kindergarten. Remove the grade barriers a year at a time moving the program up with this group.
3. Start with one school and add others gradually.
4. Continue the parent orientation program for parents of each new group coming from kindergarten and for those new in the neighborhood.
5. Have periodic meetings for teachers and parents of children involved in the plan.
6. Efficient record keeping and careful, periodic testing are essential.
7. Continue to use instructional methods previously proved effective. If more appropriate methods of instruction are made possible by removal of grade levels, they should be tried (15:645; 13:255-256).

The person planning the program has the practical assistance of the teachers and theoretical assistance from professional educators. He must remember, however, that his success will largely depend on "communication with, and consideration for, the faculty and the parents of the children" (17:152). This communication and consideration should guide every step in initiating the ungraded primary plan.

Parent Orientation

In places where the ungraded plan has been successful, administrators emphasize the importance of long-range planning, with parents involved so they completely understand and approve the plan (21:595; 20:161). One of the essential features of the ungraded primary is the provision for a continuous parent-education program. New parents must become fully acquainted with the program each year and their cooperation assured (8:21).

Considerably before the introduction of the program, parents may be invited to a meeting where the plan is explained. This explanation may be done by visiting college staff or by the school administrative staff. A combination of the two might be suitable (17:150). This orientation meeting might be held in the late spring for the parents of those kindergarten children entering the ungraded primary unit the next year. Co-sponsorship of this meeting by the local P. T. A. groups and the district professional staff would be an effective way to conclude or begin study groups on the plan (3:262).

Following the general orientation meeting, smaller groups might meet in classrooms where teachers could explain how the ungraded program will apply to their particular classes. Suggestions of ways parents can supplement instruction given in school could be discussed at this time. Panel discussions and open forums are other possibilities to aid in informing the parents (17:150).

Between conferences and meetings, a bulletin can be sent to the parents explaining what is being taught in school. This bulletin may include family activities to reinforce learning, such as television programs,

movies, plays, and museum exhibits (17:150-151).

Parent orientation meetings at least once a year are valuable in unifying parents' and teachers' concepts and interpretations of the continuous progress program. Lack of unity in this area could provoke misunderstanding and unwarranted dissatisfaction with the plan (15:646). The object of the parent orientation program is to secure the parents' understanding and acceptance of the ungraded plan. Robert Anderson (1:72) mentions an interesting discovery in regard to this acceptance:

Although these pioneering communities have discovered that much thought must be given to parent and to community relations, they have learned that parents are less affectionately attached to grade level designations than is generally supposed. Parents, sometimes even more than teachers, seem ready to accept and to promote educational practices which increase the schools capacity for meeting the individual needs of children.

Reporting the Child's Progress

The change in organization necessitates a change in pupil reporting practices. The child's accomplishments need to be measured and reported in terms of his own capacity and effort rather than in comparison with other children (20:160). Since the child is progressing at his own rate, it is no longer possible to hold him up against a fixed grade standard.

Most programs seem to favor reporting the child's progress by skill areas and in social and emotional growth. Reading progress is recorded from one level to another by dates. The most satisfactory method of reporting seems to be written reports at definite intervals supplemented by parent-teacher conferences (18:270). Written reports are time-consuming, but if the child's progress is individualized, it will be difficult to report that progress adequately by checks or marks on any one printed form.

The intervals of written reports and conferences will vary with the school and the nature of the community (18:270). Some authorities suggest written reports as often as three times a semester, while others feel one or two during the year is sufficient (14:81; 20:160). The number and kind of reporting methods would have to be determined by the individual school. A satisfactory arrangement might be a parent-teacher conference at the end of the first and third quarter, with a written report at the end of the second and fourth quarter. Other conferences should, of course, be scheduled as needed.

Student Transfer to Graded School

A student's transfer from ungraded to graded organization can be a problem if provisions are not made beforehand. This eventuality should help point up the need for keeping accurate records. Each child's academic record should include his results on standardized achievement tests, a list of the textbooks and materials he has mastered, and the teacher's evaluation of his progress to date. With this information it should be relatively easy to place him correctly in a graded school (4:26).

The parents of a child transferring to a graded school should be adequately prepared for the adjustments involved. The child may have to repeat some units of work. On that account, the child's folder might also include a list of the skills taught, with the child's mastery of each noted (17:152).

II. INSTRUCTIONAL PROBLEMS

Grouping into Classes

Methods of grouping children into classes do not follow any one

set pattern. Some children are grouped into classes by reading ability, some by age limits, some by social units. Some guidelines should be adopted for choosing the type of grouping to be used. Classification should take into consideration the overall needs of each child, including his age, social and emotional maturity, the length of time he has been in school, his academic interests and needs, and any other factors which have a direct bearing on the success of his learning experiences. Brinkman believes, "The essence of the ungraded school is a plan to group youngsters on the basis of age, certain abilities, and other related factors and then let them move ahead at their own speed" (4:24). These factors must be kept flexible enough to guarantee that the child will be grouped according to his needs (14:80).

Socially, each classroom unit should contain no one too young or old for his group. Each child should have opportunities for security and importance without feeling inferior or superior (8:645).

The program's flexibility may depend on how provision is made for a child to pass from one class to another. Constant evaluation of the child's total needs is necessary.

The Milwaukee, Wisconsin, schools, which have the oldest existing ungraded plan, have been quite satisfied with their system of grouping. Each child is designated by the number of semesters he has been in school. The child begins primary school in the first semester above kindergarten and is designated P-1. If he is a slow learner he may go as high as the eighth semester, or P-8, in the primary school. The principal and the teachers consider social and learning groupings in forming the classes.

Each class may be made up of several semester classifications; however, the age range is limited. The designations P1-P8 do not show academic achievement, rather they indicate only how many semesters the child has been in primary school (12:70; 14:79-80).

" . . . there is no established pattern in the grouping of children in non-graded schools, and in fact there probably should not be" (12:69). With grade restrictions removed, the flexibility that remains should stimulate teachers to find the best solution for their situation.

Curriculum and Materials

With the emphasis on individualized instruction, the curriculum must be adjusted to the present achievement level of the pupil. The child is setting his own pace, always progressing, never repeating or skipping any essential learnings. For these reasons, a variety of materials must be provided (21:595). According to Florence Kelly, of Milwaukee, Wisconsin:

Small sets of many different books, classified according to reading levels are made available. All children need not read the same book nor the same number of books. Since no one series is adopted as a must, each teacher is free to select reading materials from an approved list of many books. Books for developmental and independent reading are supplied in abundance (14:81).

Rigidity of curriculum will defeat the ungraded program. "Perhaps the most important factor in developing a program of continuous pupil progress is the freedom of the teacher to plan his own program within certain well-defined but rather broad limits" (2:679). This is not to say the total curriculum must be revamped; instead, it asks for certain learnings should determine what is studied. The curriculum is not altered;

the age and speed limits are simply removed.

Grouping for Instruction

Many of the statements made in the previous discussion of grouping apply here. Certain practices, though, pertain directly to grouping within the ungraded classroom. The object of intraclass grouping is the same as of the classroom unit, namely, to allow for individualized instruction at the child's pace and in such a way that he can feel he is a contributing member of the class (6:76-77).

No one type of grouping adequately fills the needs of all children. **The** basis for a group will depend on the pupil and the subject to be studied. A combination of practices would seem best. In reading and arithmetic, for example, grouping by achievement levels could be used. Social studies, health, and science might well break into interest levels or unit groups. Work-study skill groups could be used in art, research projects, and even language arts projects. The total classroom group would adapt well to such areas as discussing common problems and events, setting up goals, and preparing for social functions (6:77-78; 12:91-99). Flexibility must be the key to intraclass grouping.

III. PERSONNEL PROBLEMS

Preparation of the Staff

The importance of completely preparing the staff must be clearly understood:

The success of the non-graded program depends primarily on the understanding and the co-operation of the

teaching staff. In fact, wherever the program has been discontinued the cause has usually been the resistance of teachers who have clung to the graded organization (17:148).

The Park Forest, Illinois, schools found an ungraded primary plan must have the teachers' understanding and acceptance if it is to be successful. The teachers must be willing to give up their idea of holding a particular grade level (1:70).

The initial preparation of the staff can be accomplished in many ways. Workshops, either at the college level or within the district, are very effective. General staff meeting may be used to develop understanding. Descriptions of the plan in other schools can be discussed and analyzed in these meetings. Studying and building collections of current educational literature dealing with the ungraded primary should be made a necessity. First-hand observations in other schools using the ungraded plan are very enlightening. Visits by professors from local universities will help to encourage discussion and understanding (2:680).

Once the program is underway, continuing orientation must be provided. This orientation must include teachers presently in the system and new teachers entering the district. The workshop program will continue to aid teachers in understanding and improving the program. Allowing teachers to visit other classrooms in the district encourages exchange of ideas and flexibility. A school might dismiss early one afternoon a week to provide time for staff meetings.

New teachers entering the ungraded plan may be aided by assigning them a veteran teacher to act as consultant. A handbook for new teachers may be a useful reference. Obtaining new teachers familiar with the plan

can be simplified if the administration will work closely with the teacher training institutions. On visits to the schools of education, school personnel can explain the program to the students. Allowing primary teacher candidates to observe and visit with the staff in the program would benefit all concerned (3:261-262; 17:149).

In conclusion, the teachers' part is vital in the initiation of the ungraded primary program. Without the teachers' understanding and enthusiasm, parents will have little faith in the plan, much less make an attempt to understand it.

Teacher Placement

Under the ungraded primary plan there are several possibilities for teacher placement. Here again, flexibility is important and allows several variations. The teacher may spend a second year, or even a third, with the same group. Conversely, the group might go on to a new teacher the next year (20:161). The teacher who spends more than one year with a group has the advantage of knowing each child that much more fully. Knowing the child's strengths and weaknesses permits even greater individualized instruction. Personality conflicts may sometimes appear in this practice, yet it would be hoped that flexible class groupings would solve them (18:269).

As has been noted, there are problems to overcome when beginning an ungraded primary form of organization. None of them need be insurmountable if the administrator does sufficient planning beforehand. In all his preparation he must emphasize adequate communication between the persons involved.

CHAPTER IV

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

I. SUMMARY

This plan for the initiation of an ungraded primary program involved consideration of many areas. Among those felt to be most important, the orientation of teachers and parents received great emphasis. Understanding and acceptance by these two groups must be virtually guaranteed if the program is to succeed.

New procedures of reporting to parents must be developed. Methods commensurate with the ungraded philosophy should be used to report accurately the child's progress.

Due to their importance, grouping practices were discussed in detail. It was felt that the types of grouping selected largely determined how adequately children's needs would be met. Use of many types was encouraged, with flexibility as the keynote. Consideration of the learner, the learning situation, and the outcomes desired should suggest the type of grouping used.

II. CONCLUSIONS

One of the major accomplishments of the ungraded primary organization may be its encouragement of flexibility. In this day of rapid change and advancement, education must be willing to change. Children's needs are many and varied; instruction must adjust to meet those needs.

The administrator must institute the best type of organization to facilitate this individualized instruction.

The emphasis on the pupil being successful and receiving recognition for his progress, no matter how great or small, should greatly contribute to his mental and emotional health. Recognition of the child as an individual is encouraged by this type of organization, where progress is not governed by the speed of the group.

The administrator's success in initiating the ungraded primary program depends largely on his ability to communicate with others. The problems of administration and personnel appear to be chiefly dealing with understanding and acceptance of the program. One administrative problem, that of articulation between the ungraded primary unit and higher grades, must be solved if the benefits of the program are to be continued.

A wide variety of materials must be provided to ensure the child's continuous progress. One of the better features of the program is lost if he is limited in range of materials.

There are some problems involved in initiating the ungraded primary organization; nevertheless, it appears to offer much in return.

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