

**A CONVERSION PLAN FOR A  
NONGRADED ELEMENTARY SCHOOL**

**BY**

**HELEN VARNES CHOATE**

A CONVERSION PLAN FOR A NONGRADED  
ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

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A Research Paper  
Presented to  
the Faculty of the Graduate School  
Austin Peay State University

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

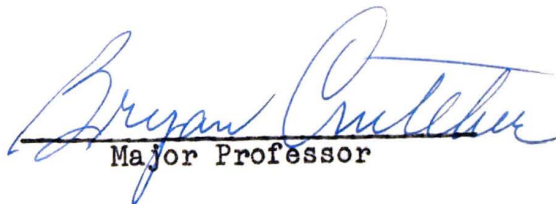
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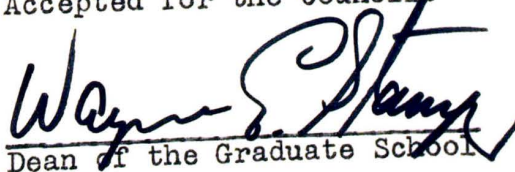
August 1969

To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a Research Paper written by Helen Varnes Choate entitled "A Conversion Plan For a Non-graded Elementary School." I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Education, with a major in Curriculum and Instruction.

  
Major Professor

Accepted for the Council

  
Dean of the Graduate School

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author wishes to express sincere gratitude to Dr. E. Bryan Crutcher, major professor, who contributed advice and suggestions throughout this study and in the preparation of the report, and to Dr. Ellis B. Burns for many helpful suggestions.



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## CHAPTER I

### THE PROBLEM

#### Introduction

For many years there has been an increased interest in individualized instruction in the elementary school. The great technological and intellectual breakthroughs have helped create a national concern for better education at all levels. The trend seems to point to the need for a flexible structure of the curriculum if the school is to meet the needs of all students.

With the increased knowledge of child development, flexibility should be included in new ways of grouping pupils.

Anderson states:

The realities of child development defy the rigorous ordering of children's abilities and attainments into conventional graded structure. For example, in the average first grade there is a spread of four years in pupil readiness to learn as suggested by mental age data. As the pupils progress through the grades, the span in readiness widens. Furthermore, a single child does not progress all in a piece; he tends to spurt ahead more rapidly in some areas than in others.<sup>1</sup>

The nongraded movement in education is influenced by several forces. According to Richard I. Miller these forces

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<sup>1</sup>John I. Goodlad and Robert H. Anderson, The Non-graded Elementary School (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1959), p. 27.

include the recognized prominence of education, advancement in science and technology with an accompanying increase in research consciousness, as well as the need for specialization, and the importance of the individual.<sup>2</sup>

#### Definitions of Terms Used

Nongraded school. A nongraded school is one in which the teachers attempt to individualize instruction for each child according to his needs, ability, and interests. There is the absence of rigorous grouping by graded structure.

Individualized instruction. A program which provides for the unique individual's needs by selection of content and situations in which he will function best.

Vertical curriculum. The progressing from kindergarten upward through the intermediate levels in the elementary school.

Horizontal grouping. This refers to placing pupils together who are able to function alike in some respect.

Team teaching. Team teaching is an organizational pattern whereby two or more teachers work together, cooperatively plan, teach and evaluate a substantial amount of the

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<sup>2</sup>Richard I. Miller, The Nongraded School: Analysis and Study (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), p. 5.

curriculum for the same group of children.<sup>3</sup>

### Statement of the Problem

It is the purpose of this study to review the literature of experts in the field of elementary education in order to:

1. Describe the steps to take in bringing about nongradedness in an elementary school, grades one through six.
2. List strengths of a nongraded program.
3. List weaknesses of the nongraded program.

### Importance of the Study

The graded school no longer meets the demands of the educational needs of large groups of children in the elementary school. The inadequacy of chronological-age grouping has become apparent, and more attention should be directed to intellectual needs of children. New ways should be explored and investigated to meet the individual differences of children in the elementary school.

### Limitations of the Study

This study was limited to the elementary grades, one through six. The nongraded organization is usually initiated

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<sup>3</sup>Anne Morgenstern (ed.), Grouping in the Elementary School (New York: Pitman Publishing Corporation, 1966), p. 61.



in the primary grades, one through three. However, this study will also include the middle grades, four through six, which include the children who have completed the primary school and are not yet in high school.

### Organization of the Study

The data are presented as the opinions of experts in the field of education.

Chapter I states the problem of the study. Chapter II presents a review of the previous research in the area of nongradedness in the elementary school. It also lists the strengths and weaknesses of the nongraded organization as seen by educators. Chapter III gives a summary and recommendations.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The nongrading of schools has come forth as a promising movement toward educational improvement, and it offers educators the flexible organization they need.<sup>1</sup> A nongraded school gives prime consideration to the needs and abilities of each individual child.

The nongraded school usually has been initiated in the place of primary grades, one through three. Since the range of differences among children is one reason for non-gradedness, then the intermediate ages with its greatest range of differences should also be considered, according to Miller, who states:

It is especially in the middle school years that many learners experience such frustration and/or boredom that school becomes an unhappy experience to be endured. . . . It is here that many bright pre-adolescents find their uniform assignments and homework completely unchallenging, and begin to look for interesting and stimulating activities outside school and classroom. . . .

Nongradedness in the middle school years should do much to provide the challenge and the success that learners need. . . . The curriculum of these years should be so planned and instructional groups so organized that each individual should be experiencing optimum challenge and success throughout the program.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Richard I. Miller, The Nongraded School: Analysis and Study (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), p. 108.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 117-118.

## Planning For a Nongraded Elementary School

Data collected reveal very clearly that the success of nongraded plans depends primarily upon the teachers' acceptance and understanding of them.<sup>3</sup> The teacher is the key figure for utilizing the resources available to him and for adjusting to needs of individual differences.

Miller lists the following prerequisites in attitude for those contemplating a nongraded school:

1. A sincere desire to help children learn and grow
2. Teacher or teachers who believe in children and who, themselves, are flexible individuals
3. Teachers and administrators with vision, courage, and stamina who will accept criticism, spend endless hours evaluating, explaining, and defending the program
4. Teachers and administrators who will "follow through" until an ungraded organization and a nongraded curriculum are achieved
5. Teachers and administrators who are willing to seek out persons with the skills to aid in assessing and advising in the project.<sup>4</sup>

There are four steps necessary for the initial planning of a nongraded elementary school, according to

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<sup>3</sup>John I. Goodlad and Robert H. Anderson, The Non-graded Elementary School (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1959), p. 210.

<sup>4</sup>Miller, op. cit., p. 110.



Evelyn M. Carswell, who says:

1. Read for philosophical orientation. Reading from a wide variety of materials enables the reader to adapt and prepare his own rationale of nongradedness.
2. See nongradedness interpreted into action. In planning for implementation of a nongraded program, it would be wise to provide funds for teams of personnel--to be sent to visit schools now practicing this innovation.
3. Identify nongraded practices now functioning. There are a wide assortment of nongraded practices already functioning.
4. Plan your strategy for change. It is appropriate to write a philosophical statement, and this can best be developed by a committee of the whole personnel.<sup>5</sup>

After all of these steps have been completed, the educational objectives should be stated in behavioral terms. These terms will implement the planning of learning activities and evaluation techniques which are important in planning for change.

After the educational objectives have been stated, the curriculum must be revised. Local staff committees should be used to develop the new curriculum. These committees should continuously inform the whole staff of their

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<sup>5</sup>Evelyn M. Carswell, "The Nongraded School: Planning for It, Establishing It, Maintaining It," The National Elementary Principal, 47:11-15, November, 1967.



progress to maintain interest in the program.

Robert F. Savitt gives the following convictions relative to curriculum change, and the vertical curriculum approach:

1. Significant curriculum change can take place in a relatively short period of time.

2. A vertical curriculum in the field of language arts (and other curriculum areas also) can enhance educational opportunities for pupils.

3. An extensive amount of in-service education for staff members is required if a vertical curriculum is to be properly implemented.

4. The proper implementation of a vertical curriculum requires a re-analysis of organizational structure, deployment of staff and pupils, and a refinement of teaching materials.<sup>6</sup>

Many educators have given steps to follow in developing a nongraded program. Frank R. Dufay gives sixteen guidelines:

1. In adopting an ungraded school, the changes that are required or found desirable should be made gradually and cautiously.

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<sup>6</sup>Frank R. Dufay, Ungrading the Elementary School (West Nyack, New York: Parker Publishing Company, Inc., 1966), p. 157.

2. The district superintendent (or chief school administrator), as the most important agent for change, should demonstrate full support and enthusiasm for the program.

3. One school only should be designated as the pilot school for the first year of operation.

4. Participation of other schools, in following years, should be voluntary; decisions on this should be rendered through the building principal.

5. In the first year, the first three grades should be replaced.

6. During the second year, a determination should be made, as a result of study, as to whether or not additional grades should undergo the ungrading process.

7. The new policy on retention and acceleration would be made known to all concerned, particularly those characteristics which distinguish it from the "left back" and "skipped" aspects of the old policy.

8. The elementary reading consultant, or other such specialist, should work with the kindergarten teachers during the last several weeks of school in order to standardize pupil evaluation, particularly as related to pupil placement for the new school year.

9. Readiness tests are recommended for administration to first year primary students within five weeks of the first day of school. Other primary students would be tested

with other standardized tests. The informal reading inventory is an excellent determiner of real reading level.

10. Each class should have social and academic leaders; problem children should be equally distributed; no isolates should be kept in a class if different placement can resolve the matter; reading groups should be limited to three, these being contiguous.

11. Teachers of the lower levels should have the smaller class sizes.

12. During the first year of operation, meetings between the primary teachers and building administration should be held with relative frequency.

13. A meeting of primary teachers, building administration, school psychologist, and reading consultant should be held at the end of the first five week period for the purpose of refining grouping. Necessary changes would be made. Throughout the year, thereafter, changes would be made as necessary, although there is no reason to anticipate large numbers of these changes.

14. A full program of orientation should be provided for: the elementary principals, the primary teachers, and the parents whose children would participate in the program. Special provisions should be made for the new primary staff.

15. A program of familiarization should be provided for those staff members who are not directly involved in the beginning years.



16. The reporting system should be modified to include formal parent-teacher conferences and anecdotal reporting.<sup>7</sup>

### Individualized Instruction

According to some educators the major provocation for current interest in nongrading appears to be the compilation of evidence about individual differences.<sup>8</sup>

William P. McLoughlin says:

As long as schools seek practices designed to group away differences, they are not nongraded. Nongrading says: "Accept children as they are, with all their differences, and teach to these differences. Don't try to eradicate them!"<sup>9</sup>

John O. Bolvin and Robert Glases report that the materials are the key to providing an individualized program that is both workable and economically feasible.<sup>10</sup>

Miller suggests that the central factors that emerge from the criteria for instructional materials are these: variety, accessibility, several levels of difficulty,

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., pp. 202-203.

<sup>8</sup>The Sixty-first Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, Individualizing Instruction (Chicago: The National Society for the Study of Education, 1962), p. 267.

<sup>9</sup>William P. McLoughlin, "The Phantom Nongraded School," The Education Digest, 33:11-13, March, 1968.

<sup>10</sup>John O. Bolvin and Robert Glases, "Development Aspects of Individually Prescribed Instruction," Audio-visual Instruction, 13:828-831, October, 1968.



relevance to the objectives, and suitability for independent use by students.<sup>11</sup>

Miller says that the following seven examples of individualized instruction in the classroom emphasized that differences in pupils are far more important than similarities, and therefore, more independent study is required in the nongraded school:

1. Students frequently work independently on projects and assignments relevant to their individual interests, abilities, and needs.

2. Students in groups of from two to six frequently work together or are instructed by the teacher.

3. Such independent study or small group instruction occurs in all subjects of the curriculum.

4. A period when the entire class receives instruction as a group is the exception rather than the rule.

5. Independent study or small group instruction accounts for a large portion--perhaps approaching two-thirds--of each student's day.

6. Students are encouraged and allowed to follow their individual interests, investigate problems, ask questions, make decisions, and report on their individual efforts.

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<sup>11</sup>Miller, op. cit., p. 53.

7. Individual efforts of students are adequately rewarded in terms of teacher approval and by appropriate grades.<sup>12</sup>

Judson T. Shaplin and Henry F. Olds, Jr. agree that:

The method of obtaining individualized instruction is not flexible grouping, especially not the sort that uses many large-group sessions. Rather, the method is to increase the proportion of time that all students can engage in independent, self-directed study. When this result is achieved, the teacher is freed of the necessity for whole-group teaching and can devote the bulk of his time to guiding the individual learner. Programed materials foster individualization by enabling the student to work alone and at his own pace. A more fundamental approach to individualization is to teach each student those competencies in self-instruction that enable him to program his own learning tasks and to perform them independently.<sup>13</sup>

### Grouping

The horizontal axis of the nongraded school is related to the placement of children in groups. Grouping for an individual classroom requires that various factors be considered. The most important factor for grouping in a nongraded school is flexibility. Ernest Dyson says:

On the basis of previous research and previous studies dealing with grouping procedure, it would appear that many factors must contribute to a comfortable psychological climate in which boys and girls can feel secure, feel valued as individuals, and experience personal progress. Any consideration as to how young people might best be grouped for instruction, then, must involve a complex study along many lines

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<sup>12</sup>Miller, op. cit., p. 54.

<sup>13</sup>Judson T. Shaplin and Henry F. Olds, Jr., Team Teaching (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), p. 362.

and must seek that solution most compatible with current knowledge and local conditions.<sup>14</sup>

A "Kindergarten Check-Sheet For Reading Readiness" has been used in many schools to aid in the categorization process. An item by item examination of the checklist follows:

1. Auditory Rhyming. Has the child developed the ability to hear rhyming words?

2. Auditory Beginning Sounds. Is the child able to select those words, which he hears, which begin with the same initial sound?

3. Visual-Gross Shapes. Is the child able to recognize the similarity and dissimilarity of the common shapes?

4. Visual-Matching Words and Letters. Is the child able to select the matching words or letters when he sees a small group of words or letters together?

5. Letter Names. Is the child able to identify the letters of the alphabet in mixed order?

6. Speaking Vocabulary. How does the child compare with his peers or with his age group in the category?

7. Listening Vocabulary (Comprehension). After listening to a story, how well is the child able to

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<sup>14</sup>Ernest Dyson, "A Study of Ability Grouping and the Self-Concept," Journal of Educational Research, 60:403-405, May-June, 1967.



interpret what he has heard?

8. Follows Directions. To what degree is the child able to follow oral directions, from the simplest to the more complex?

9. Attention Span. For how long a period is the child able to focus on an activity?

10. Retention. How does he rank with his age group in his ability to remember details of a story, memorization of a poem?

11. Eye-Hand Coordination. How well can he duplicate on paper figures that he sees on the chalkboard? Is he able to contain crayon marks within boundaries?

12. Interest in Learning to Read. This one item should reflect, generally, an overall ability in the preceding items as well as a willingness to cope with the printed symbol.<sup>15</sup>

This checklist can be used by the elementary teachers for placing children in certain levels in the nongraded school. In all cases where this list has been used the teacher judgment was the final determining factor in establishing rank.

Dufay says that the experienced, professional classroom teacher shows preference for a pupil distribution

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<sup>15</sup>Dufay, op. cit., pp. 41-42.



wherein each class has its share of pupil leaders, where the range of abilities is controlled, where the inevitable problems are equitably apportioned so as to reduce the probability of the class being predisposed to enervating chaos. . . . Other factors to consider are teacher and parent personalities.<sup>16</sup>

Miller stated that proper grouping would include the following:

- Reading achievement or readiness evaluation based upon standardized tests
- Achievement measured by teacher-made tests
- Basic learning ability as measured by standardized tests
- Emotional and social maturity
- Combined judgment of the teachers, counselors, and principals<sup>17</sup>

Another possibility for grouping in the nongraded elementary school is team teaching. The flexibility of team teaching offers a means for teachers to become more creative in their thinking. Philip Lambert says:

One of the marks of a genuine team program is that it uses the special abilities of all its members to the fullest extent. . . .

When a teaching team begins to plan its program, the first discovery it usually makes is that the standard curriculum materials will not do the job. . . . Audio-visual aids and equipment must be purchased for the large group meetings, and special subject materials are needed for the wide variety of pupil groupings possible under a team plan.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Dufay, op. cit., p. 36.

<sup>17</sup>Miller, op. cit., p. 237.

<sup>18</sup>Anne Morgenstern (ed.), Grouping in the Elementary School (New York: Pitman Publishing Corporation, 1966), pp. 52-60.

Goodlad and Anderson report that some schools are deliberately establishing class groups that cut across a number of grade lines, while others are experimenting with teams of teachers working with classroom groups that have been combined, at least in part, into a larger unit. Therefore, there is no established pattern in the grouping of children in nongraded schools, and in fact there probably should not be. Once grade-mindedness has been shattered and teachers begin to deal with children within a more flexible frame of reference, many possible solutions to age-old problems are likely to come to mind.<sup>19</sup>

#### Strengths and Weaknesses of Nongradedness

According to Miller, the following statements for nongradedness are not necessarily valid or conclusive, but from his study of nongradedness he contributed the following strengths:

1. Recognition of and provision for individual differences among children
2. Flexibility in administrative structure
3. Abolition of artificial barriers of grades and promotion
4. Respect for the continuity and interrelatedness

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<sup>19</sup>John I. Goodlad and Robert H. Anderson, The Non-graded Elementary School (revised edition, New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1963), p. 70.

5. Student progress commensurate with ability
6. Improved mental health for both teachers and students
7. Stimulation for major curricular revision
8. Harmony with the educational objectives of a democratic society
9. Administrative feasibility for all levels and age groups
10. Schools program-oriented rather than operationally controlled<sup>20</sup>

Anderson lists some alleged weaknesses as seen by some observers:

1. Nongradedness leads to soft pedagogy; it lacks fixed standards and requirements.
2. It places an impossible burden on the teacher.
3. It replaces grade requirements by reading levels.
4. It results in a lack of information on pupil progress to parents.
5. It is difficult to put into practice, because teachers are inadequately and insufficiently prepared.
6. It does not have minimal standards for all children.
7. Its curriculum sequence tends to lack specificity and order.

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<sup>20</sup>Miller, op. cit., p. 222.



8. It is only an improved means to an unimproved end.

9. It does not guarantee that improved teaching will result.

10. It suffers from widespread use and even abuse of the term "nongraded."

11. There is some difficulty in aligning graded with nongraded schools (for example, a primary unit and a graded intermediate program).

12. Teachers and parents are so conditioned to the graded structure that they continue "grademindedness."

13. Extensive records must be kept for each child.

14. Planning new methods of reporting to parents demands much time and work from the already heavily burdened faculty.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Robert H. Anderson, Teaching in a World of Change (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1966), p. 61-63.



## CHAPTER III

### SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Summary

The purpose of this study was to review the literature of experts in the field of elementary education in order to describe the steps to take in bringing about non-gradedness in an elementary school, grades one through six; and to list strengths and weaknesses of the nongraded program. This problem was chosen because the graded school no longer meets the demands of the educational needs of large groups of children in the elementary school.

The information for this study was obtained by reading the literature of experts in the field of elementary education. The latest editions of books and magazine articles on nongradedness were read.

Data collected reveal that certain attitudes of those contemplating a nongraded school are important for the success of the program. The teachers must accept and understand the nongraded program. The teacher is the key figure who should adjust to the needs of individual differences of pupils.

Since there are a wide assortment of nongraded practices already functioning, these practices should be

identified. Some educators believe that the program should replace the first three grades the first year; and during the second year, additional grades should undergo the nongrading process.

A full program of orientation should be provided for all members of the school staff, and special provision should be made for the new primary staff.

Providing for individual differences is of major interest in the nongraded innovation. Materials are the key to providing an individualized program. Criteria for instructional materials are variety, accessibility, several levels of difficulty, relevance to the objective, and suitability for independent use by students.

Programed materials foster individualization by enabling students to work alone. Also, team teaching offers a means for teachers to become more creative.

Grouping is an important part of nongradedness. Grouping involves a complex study along many lines and must seek solutions with current knowledge and local conditions. Grouping could include such criteria as reading achievement, teacher-made tests, basic learning ability as measured by standardized tests, emotional and social maturity, etc.

Nongradedness has not been proved to be necessarily more valid than the graded method. There are certain strengths which ascribe to its validity. Some of these

strengths are: flexibility in structure, provision for individual difference, continuity and interrelatedness of learning, and stimulation for curricular revision.

Some of the weaknesses seen by some educators are: lack of fixed standards and requirements, places a burden on the teacher, does not have minimal standards for all children, difficulty in aligning graded with the non-graded schools, and extensive records must be kept.

### Recommendations

It is recommended that the elementary school of the future seek to develop programs for each individual pupil by using the nongraded philosophy. Instructional materials need to be developed for this type of school.

More in-service programs on nongradedness will have to be offered to the teacher. College courses will have to be offered for the new teachers on the nongradedness innovation.



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